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"Dey calls me Little Bit."

Drawn by E. W. Kemble.

FURTHER E. K. MEANS

*Is this a title? It is not. It is
the name of a writer of negro stories,
who has made himself so completely
the writer of negro stories that this
third book, like the first and second,
needs no title.*

ILLUSTRATED BY
KEMBLE

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BY

E. K. MEANS



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The Left Hind Foot

I

ANGELS

HE was the most innocent-looking chap you ever saw. He had the face of a cherub, eyes which inhabit the faces of angels, and a smile which every woman envied.

During her lifetime his mother had called him an angel. His sister composed a title for him from the initials of his name, and for short called him Org. The neighbors called him—if everything the neighbors called him should be recorded, this story would have to be fumigated at the very start.

He had just come to Tickfall from California. His mother and father did not miss him when he left, for they were dead. The neighbors missed him, but they did not mourn his loss. When Orren Randolph Gaitskill had gone, some predicted that he would be the loudest tick in Tickfall. They did not mean to flatter the youth or pay him a compliment. Everybody breathed easier, the cats came down out of the trees, the little girls

walked the streets without the fear that their pig-tails of hair would be used for leading ropes, and the old inhabitants thankfully prophesied that there would be no more earthquakes in California.

As for Miss Virginia Harwick Gaitskill, his sister—bless her! the earth never shook when she was around, but the hearts of men were strangely agitated.

Everybody called Miss Virginia an angel except her angelic brother. He called her "Gince."

Just now that young lady stood upon the portico of Colonel Tom Gaitskill's home, calling in a clear, deep-toned voice:

"Org! Oh, Org! Come here!"

That youth, who had been playing "Indian" upon the Gaitskill lawn, promptly dropped upon his stomach at the sound of her voice, kept himself concealed behind some thick shrubbery, and began, as he expressed it, to "do a sneak." His intended destination was the capacious stable in the rear of the premises. But he did not get far.

"Hurry up, Org! Come on here! I see you!" his sister called.

Her last remark was an absolute falsehood. She did not see him. But angels have a language of their own. It is not possible to command their attendance by ordinary earthly methods, and Virginia's way succeeded.

"Aw, what you want, Gince? A feller can't have no time to himself when you are around."

"I want stamps, Org," the girl said sweetly. "Take this fifty-cent piece and bring me back twenty-five twos."

"What's the name of that there woman in that post-office?"

"Miss Paunee," she told him.

"It sounds like a mustang name to me," Org remarked, pocketing the money ungraciously, and starting away with his hat pulled down over his eyes.

A moment later he assumed his former character, that of a prowling Indian, and his progress toward the street was from bush to bush and from tree to tree. He crept noiselessly down the street, looking from side to side with alert watchfulness, giving each bit of shrubbery and clump of weeds a careful inspection in anticipation of lurking enemies. When he came to the brow of the hill he ran downward at full speed. It was easier to run than to walk; slower speed would require the effort of holding back, and a genuine Indian hates work. At the foot of the hill he stopped like a clock with a broken spring.

There stood before him a little negro boy, almost exactly his size, and apparently his own age. Org's first impression was that the stranger was certainly dark-complected, there being no variation in the color scheme except the whites of his eyes. Org's next thought was that the darky was queerly dressed.

The Left Hind Foot

He was wearing a woman's silk shirt-waist; his coat had originally belonged to some woman's coat-suit, adjusted to the present wearer by bobbing its tail. His trousers had once belonged to some man who was much larger in the waist and much longer in the leg; but the present owner of the nether garments had made certain clumsy adjustments and the trousers made a sort of fit. The stranger's legs were covered with a woman's purple-silk stockings, and on his flat feet were a pair of high-heeled pumps.

"Hello!" Org said, his eyes glued to the lady-like clothes.

"Mawnin', Marse, howdy?" the little negro responded timidly.

"My name ain't Marse, it's Org," the white boy replied. "What's your name? Who are you?"

"Dey calls me Little Bit. I's Cap'n Kerley's white nigger, an' I sorter janitors aroun' de Hen-Scratch."

"White nigger?" Org remarked wonderingly, after a comprehensive survey of the negro boy. "The white of your eyes is white. That's all the white I can see. Where you going?"

"Out to de Cooley bayou on de Nigger-Heel plantation."

"Me, too," Org remarked as he fell in step beside the negro boy.

Which is the reason why Miss Gaitskill waited impatiently the rest of the day for her stamps.

Without knowing it, Orren Randolph Gaitskill had found the greatest playmate in the world. Let every man born south of the Ohio River say "Amen!"

Little Bit was an angel, too. His mother called him "her angel chile." His mother had fifteen other angelic children in her cabin, Little Bit being the youngest and the last. So his mother named him Peter, after his father, and Postscript to indicate his location in the annals of the family; thus Peter Postscript Chew took his place in the world.

But white folks never pay any attention to a negro's name. They called him Little Bit.

In front of the Hen-Scratch saloon in the negro settlement known as Dirty-Six, Little Bit climbed into an empty farm wagon to which two mules were harnessed.

"Dis here is Mustard Prophet's team. He's de overseer on Marse Tom's Nigger-Heel plantation. I prefers to set down an' travel. It ails my foots to walk. Mustard'll let us ride."

"I rode in a automobile in California," Org remarked as he climbed into the wagon beside Little Bit.

"You's fixin' to ride in a aughter-be-a-mule now," Little Bit snickered.

Mustard came out of the saloon and viewed the two boys with a great pretense of surprise.

"You two young gen'lemans gwine out wid me, too?" he asked.

"Yes, suh," Little Bit told him.

"Gosh! I'll shore hab a busy day wid de babies," Mustard growled in a good-natured tone. "Dat ole Popsy Spout is in de secont imbecility of his secont childhood, an' dis here white chile an' dis cullud chile—lawdy!"

He climbed upon the wagon seat and clucked to his mules, driving slowly down the crooked, sandy road toward the Shin Bone eating-house.

"You boys watch dis team till I gits back," he ordered. "Popsy's gwine out wid us."

II

POPSY SPOUT

About the time the boys had climbed into Mustard's wagon in front of the saloon, Popsy Spout had entered the door of the eating-house and stood there with all the hesitancy of imbecility.

He was over six feet tall and as straight as an Indian. His face was as black as tar, and was seamed with a thousand tiny wrinkles. His long hair was as white as milk, and his two wrinkled and withered hands rested like an eagle's talons upon a patriarchal staff nearly as tall as himself.

On his head was a stove-pipe hat, bell-shaped, the nap long since worn off and the top of the hat stained a brick-red by exposure to the weather. An old, faded, threadbare and patched sack coat

swathed his emaciated form like a bobtailed bathrobe.

The greatest blight which old age had left upon his dignified form was in his eyes: the vacant, age-dimmed stare of second childhood, denoting that reason no longer sat regnant upon the crystal throne of the intellect.

There were many tables in the eating-house, but Popsy could not command his mind and his judgment to the point of deciding which table he would choose or in which chair he would seat himself.

Shin Bone, from the rear of his restaurant, looked up and gave a grunt of disgust.

"Dar's dat ole fool come back agin," he growled. "Ef you'd set him in one of dese here revolver chairs, he wouldn't hab sense enough to turn around in it. I reckon I'll hab to go an' sell him a plate of soup."

"Mawnin', Popsy," he said cordially, as he walked to the door where the old man stood. Shin reserved a private opinion of all his patrons, but outwardly he was very courteous to all of them, for very good business reasons.

"Mawnin', Shinny," Popsy said with a sighing respiration. "I wus jes' tryin' to reckoleck whut I come in dis place fur an' whar must I set down at."

"I reckon you better set down up close to de kitchen, whar you kin smell de vittles. Dat 'll git you more fer yo' money," Shin snickered. "I

reckin you is hankerin' atter a bowl of soup, ain't you?"

"I b'lieve dat wuz whut I come in dis place fer. I's gittin' powerful fergitful as de days goes by."

"You comes in here mighty nigh eve'y day fer a bowl of soup," Shin told him. "Is you fergot dat fack?"

"Is dat possible?" Popsy exclaimed. "I muss be spendin' my money too free."

"You needn't let dat worry yo' mind," Shin replied, as he motioned to a negro waitress to bring the soup. "You ain't got nobody to suppote but yo' own self."

"Figger Bush lives wid me," Popsy growled. "He oughter he'p suppote me some, but he won't do it. He wuz always a most onreliable pickaninny, an' all de good I ever got out of him I had to beat out wid a stick."

"Figger's wife oughter git some wuck out of him," Shin laughed.

"She cain't do it! Excusin' dat, she ain't home right now. Dat's how come I's got to eat wid you," Popsy grumbled, digging the tine of his fork into the soft pine table to accentuate his remarks, and then flourishing the fork in the air for emphasis. "Figger is de lazies' nigger in de worl'."

Having uttered this remark, the old man leaned back in his chair and thrust the fork into his coat pocket while his aged eyes stared out of the window at nothing. Shin noted the disappearance of the

fork, but did not mention it. The negro waitress appeared, placed the soup under the old man's nose and went away. At last he glanced down.

"Fer de Lawd's sake!" he exclaimed. "Whar did dis here soup come from?"

"You jes' now ordered it," Shin said sharply. "I had a cullud gal fotch it to you, an' you got to pay fer it."

"I won't pay for it ontill atter I done et it," Popsy growled.

He picked up a knife, started to dip it into the soup, found that this was the wrong tool, and thrust the knife into the pocket of his coat to keep company with the purloined fork.

Shin noted the disappearance of the knife, but said nothing. He handed Popsy a pewter spoon and remarked:

"You better lap it up quick, Popsy; she'll be gittin' cold in a minute."

"Who'll be gittin' cold?" Popsy asked absently. "I didn't hear tell of no she havin' a cold. Is she got a rigger? Dese here spring days draws out all de p'ison in de blood."

"Naw, suh. I says de soup will git cold."

"Aw," Popsy answered, as he dipped his spoon in the liquid and sipped it. "Dis soup am pretty tol'able good. Does you chaw yo' vittles fawty times, Shinny?"

"Not de same vittles," Shin said. "I chaws mo' dan fawty times at a meal, I reckon."

"Marse Tom Gaitskill says dat people oughter chaw deir vittles fawty times befo' dey swallows it."

"I'd hate to practise on a oystyer," Shin giggled. "White folks is always talkin' fool notions."

Shin sat by and watched the old man as he consumed the remainder of his soup in silence. He also ate some crackers, drank a cup of coffee, to all appearances unconscious that Shin sat beside him. Finally, he looked up with a slightly surprised manner and asked:

"Whut did you say to me, Shinny?"

"I said I'd hate to practise on oystyers."

"Practise whut on oystyers?"

"Chawin' one fawty times," Shin explained.

"My gawsh!" Popsy snorted. "Who ever heard tell of anybody in his real good sense chawin' a raw oystyer fawty times? Is you gone crippled in yo' head?"

"Naw, suh, I——"

The old man did not wait for the reply, but interrupted by rising to his feet with the intention of going out. The spoon he was holding he did not lay down upon the table, but carried it toward the door with him.

"De price is fifteen cents, Popsy," Shin reminded him, as he followed him toward the front. "Let me hold yo' spoon while you feels fer yo' money."

"I didn't fotch no spoon wid me," the old man

whined, as he held it out to Shin. "Dis spoon is your'n."

He paid the money to Shin, and started toward the door again, when he was once more intercepted.

"Lemme fix de collar of yo' coat, brudder," Shin suggested.

He seized the old man by the shoulders, shook the loose coat on his thin shoulders, and pretended to fit it around his wrinkled neck; at the same time, he thrust his hand into the coat pocket and extracted the purloined knife and fork.

Popsy never missed them. In fact, he did not know that he had them. Shin handed him his patriarchal staff and gave him a slight push toward the door.

At that moment Mustard Prophet stood at the entrance, "Is you ready to go out, Popsy?" Mustard asked cordially, as he shook hands.

"Dar now!" Popsy snorted. "I knowed I come in dis place fer some puppus, but I couldn't think whut it wus. I promised to meet Mustard here. He's gwine take me out to his house to dinner, an' I'm done went an' et!"

"Dat's no diffunce, Popsy," Mustard chuckled. "You'll be hongry agin by de time you gits out to de Nigger-Heel."

Popsy stopped beside the wagon and stared in pop-eyed amazement at the white boy who sat with his feet hanging out of the rear end.

"Befo' Gawd!" the old man bawled. "Dar's

little Jimmy Gaitskill dat I ain't seed fer sixty year'!"

"You's gwine back too fur, Popsy," Mustard laughed. "Dat's Marse Jimmy Gaitskill's grand-chile."

"Huh," the old man grunted, as Mustard helped him to a seat in the wagon. "De Gaitskills look de same all over de worl'."

"How does dey look, Popsy?" Mustard chuckled.

"Dey's got de look of eagles," Popsy replied.

Shin watched the wagon until it disappeared around a turn in the road. His eyes were on Popsy's bent form as far as he could see it.

"Dat's de biggest bat I ever knowed," Shin remarked to the world as he turned back and entered his place of business.

III

THE RABBIT-FOOT

Two hours later, Mustard Prophet stopped his wagon in the horse lot of the Nigger-Heel plantation.

"Dis is whar you mounts down, Popsy," he said.

"Whut does I git off here fer?" Popsy asked querulously.

"Gawd knows," Mustard grinned. "I done fotch you out to de plantation as by per yo' own request. Dis is it."

He lifted the aged man down and walked with him to the house, making slow progress as the old man supported himself with his staff and insisted on stopping at frequent intervals to discuss some vagary of his mind, or to dispute something that Mustard had said.

At last Mustard assisted him to a chair on the porch and handed him a glass of water.

"Glad to hab you-alls out here wid me, Popsy," he proclaimed. "Set down an' rest yo' hat and foots."

"I ain't seed de Nigger-Heel plantation fer nigh onto fifty year," Popsy whined. "I used to wuck on dis plantation off an' on when I wus a growin' saplin'."

"Dis place is changed some plenty since you used to potter aroun' it," Mustard said pridefully. "Marse Tom specify dat dis am one of de show-farms of all Louzanny. I made it jes' whut it is now."

"Dis ole house is 'bout all I reckernizes real good," Popsy replied. "It ain't changed much."

"Naw, suh. I don't let dis house git changed. Marse Tom lived here a long time, an' when he moved to town I's kinder kep' de house like it wus when he lef' it, only sorter made it like hisn in Tickfall. Marse Tom is gwine lemme live here till I dies. He tole me dat hisse'f."

"It shore is nice to hab a good home," Popsy said, looking vacantly toward the near-by woods,

where he could hear the loud shouts of Little Bit and Orren Randolph Gaitskill.

"Would you wish to see de insides of de house?" Mustard asked. "I got eve'ything plain an' simple, but it's fine an' dandy fer a nigger whose wife ain't never out here to keep house. Hopey cooks fer Marse Tom, an' I got to take keer of things by myse'f."

"It's real nice not to hab no lady-folks snoopin' aroun' de place," Popsy asserted. "Dey blim-blams you all de time about spittin' on de flo' an' habin' muddy foots."

They walked about the house inspecting it. Popsy followed Mustard about, listening inattentively to Mustard's talk, wondering what it was all about. He came to one room which attracted his attention because it looked as though it held the accumulated junk of years.

"Whut you keep all dis trash in dis room fer, Mustard?"

"Dis ain't trash. Dese here is Marse Tom's curiosities," Mustard explained. "Dis is like a show—all kinds of funny things in here."

The old man stepped within the room, and Mustard began to act as showman, displaying and expatiating upon all the interesting things of the place.

The room bore a remote resemblance to a museum. When Gaitskill had first moved on the plantation, nearly fifty years before, he had amused himself by making a collection of the

things he found upon the farm and in the woods, which interested him or took his fancy. For instance, here was a vine which was twisted so that it resembled a snake. That was all there was to it. Because it looked like a snake, Gaitskill had picked it up and brought it to the house and added it to his collection.

Stuff of this sort had accumulated in that room for years. Mustard had no use for the room. Gaitskill had not needed it before him. When the overseer moved in, he had zealously guarded Marse Tom's curiosities. As for Colonel Gaitskill, he did not even know the trash was in existence.

Mustard had added to the accumulation through the years. Now and then, in his work in the fields or woods, he would find something that reminded him of something that Marse Tom had "saved" in that room, so he would bring it in and add that to the pile.

So now Mustard had something to talk to Popsy about, and he talked Popsy to the verge of distraction, proclaiming all sorts of fanciful reasons for the preservation of each curious object. The old man was bored as he had never been bored in all his life. His feeble form began to droop with weariness, his mind failed to grasp the words which Mustard pronounced with such unction, but Mustard did not notice, and would not have minded if he had observed Popsy's inattention. He intoned his words impressively and talked on and on.

At last Mustard opened a drawer and drew out a small, green-plush box. He opened this box with impresssive gestures, as if it was some sacred object to be handled with extreme reverence. He held the opened box under Popsy Spout's nose.

"Dat's de greatest treasure we's got in dis house, Popsy," he announced.

"Whut am dat?" Popsy asked, rallying his scattered wits.

"Dat's de royal rabbit-foot whut fotch all de luck to de Nigger-Heel plantation," Mustard proclaimed. "Marse Tom gimme dat foot fifteen years ago. He said dat all his luck come from dat foot. He tole me to keep it an' it would fotch good luck to me. It shore has done it."

Popsy gazed down into the plush box. What he saw was a rabbit-foot with a silver cap on one end, and in the center of the cap was a small ring which might be used to hang the rabbit-foot on a watch-chain if one cared to possess such a watch-charm.

A few years ago the rabbit-foot novelty was for sale in any jewelry store in the South, and cost about one dollar. Because of the negro superstition regarding the luck of the rabbit's foot, Gaitskill had bought one for his negro overseer.

The white man in the South in his dealings with the negroes is never skeptical of their favorite superstitions. In presenting the rabbit-foot to Mustard, Gaitskill had drawn upon his imagination and told a wonderful story of the efficacy of

this particular luck-charm. He had been lost in the swamp, so Gaitskill said, and this foot had shown him the way out; he had fallen into the Gulf of Mexico, and this foot had saved his life; he had been poor, and now he was rich; he had been sick, and now he was well; he had been young, and now he was old—and all because of the luck of that particular rabbit-foot. All of this emphasized in Mustard's mind the importance which Gaitskill attached to the possession of the foot, and made him believe that the white man only parted with it because he wanted his favorite negro overseer to share some of the good fortune which had come to him.

The tale had so impressed Mustard that he regarded that plush box with its sacred foot as being the most valuable thing upon the Nigger-Heel plantation. He guarded it constantly, and would have protected it from theft or injury with his life.

"Dat is puffleckly wonderful," Mustard declared, gazing at the treasure with reverent eyes.

"Yes, suh, dat's whut," Popsy agreed dreamily "Le's hunt some place to set down."

IV

BLACK IS BLACK

In the meantime, Orren Randolph Gaitskill was out in the woods, getting acquainted with

Little Bit. He asked many questions, and in a brief time he thought he knew all about his companion. Then he made a discovery, so unexpected, so overwhelming, that it terrified him and sent him through the woods and up to the house, squalling like a monkey.

"Dar's a dandy swimmin'-hole over by dat cypress-tree, Marse Org," Little Bit remarked.

"I ain't been swimming since I left the Pacific Ocean," was Org's reply as he started in a run toward the designated spot.

As he ran, he began to shed his clothes. His hat dropped off first because that was easiest to remove, then his tie, after that his shirt was jerked off and cast aside. He could have been trailed from the starting point to the bayou by the clothes he left behind him. On the edge of the water he hopped out of his remaining garments and plunged head-first into the stream.

Ten seconds later, he rose to the surface shaking the water out of his eyes. It had taken Little Bit just that much longer to undress. At that moment, Little Bit leaped into the water, arms and legs outspread, his purpose being to make as much splash as possible.

He made a big splash, but he made a bigger sensation.

When Org saw that black object coming into the water after him, he got out of there. With a terrified shriek he splashed to the bank, scrambled

up the muddy, slippery edge, and ran squalling across the woods toward the plantation-house.

Little Bit was mystified and terrified. He followed the shrieking white boy through the woods. Org ran into the open field, uttering a terrified wail at each jump. His fright became contagious, and while Little Bit did not have the least idea what it was all about, he added his wails to Org's lamentations, and the woods echoed with the sounds of woe.

They scrambled over the fence and into the yard and ran screaming up the steps and into the house, just as Popsy had suggested that they hunt a place to sit down.

Mustard ran into the hall and confronted two boys, naked as the day they were born, both screaming at the top of their voices.

"Shut up, you idjit chillun!" Mustard howled. "Whut de debbil ails you? Whar is yo'-all's clothes at?"

The terrified white boy ran to Mustard, threw both arms around his waist, and buried his face in Mustard's coat tail to shut out the awful sight. But he did not stop his screaming.

"Hey, you brats!" Mustard whooped. "Shut up yo' heads! Whut you howlin' about? Hush!"

Both boys suddenly stopped screaming, and there was a moment of silence. Mustard waited for them to get their breath and explain. All sorts of things had happened in Mustard's varie-

gated career, but this was new, to have two boys come prancing into his house without a stitch of clothes on their bodies, both screaming like maniacs. Little Bit was the first to catch his breath and speak.

"Whut ails you, Marse Org?" he asked in that soft, drawling, pathetic tone, whose minor note is the heritage of generations of servile ancestors. "Is a snake done bit you? Is you done fall straddle of a alligator when you jumped in de water? How come you ack dis-a-way?"

These questions served as a sufficient explanation to Mustard for their lack of clothes. Something had frightened them while they were swimming in the bayou.

Org opened his eyes and peeped around Mustard's hip at Little Bit. Then he stepped aside and took a long look at the colored boy's ebony body.

"Why, Little Bit," Org exclaimed, "you are black all over your body!"

"Suttinly," Little Bit agreed heartily. "I's black as de bottom of a deep hole in de night-time. I's a real *cullud* pusson, I is."

"But—but—I thought you would be white under your clothes," Org exclaimed.

"Naw, suh, I ain't never been no color but black, inside an' out, on top an' down under," Little Bit chuckled.

"But you said you were the cap'ns white nigger," Org argued.

"Dat don't mean white in color," Little Bit explained. "De cap'n, he jes' calls me dat because I remembers my raisin' an' does my manners an' acks white."

"It 'pears to me like you boys is bofe fergot yo' raisin' an' yo' manners," Mustard snorted. "Whut you mean by comin' up to my house as naked as a new-hatched jay-bird? 'Spose dey wus lady-folks in dis house—whut dey ain't, bless Gawd! Wouldn't you two pickaninnies cut a caper runnin' aroun' here wid nothin' on but yo'selfs an' yo' own skins?"

"I was so scared I left my clothes on the creek," Org explained shamefacedly.

"I'll go back wid you-alls. I don't b'lieve you bofe got sense enough to find yo' gyarments," Mustard grumbled. "Whar wus you-all swimmin' at?"

As the three walked out, Popsy Spout stood for a moment, his vacant eyes wandering over a room full of the most astounding accumulation of junk any collector ever assembled. It all meant nothing to Popsy. He was tired, awfully tired. The ride from town had wearied him, Mustard's talk had wearied him, the pickaninnies on the plantation seemed to make a lot of noise. A long time ago he had asked Mustard to find him some place to sit down. He decided he would prefer to lie down. He needed rest and calm.

But Mustard was gone somewhere. He could

hear his bawling voice getting farther away from the house all the time. He might be gone for a long time. He couldn't sit down on that pile of junk. So Popsy walked feebly to the door and stood looking into the hall.

As he put his hand up to the door-jamb to support himself, he discovered that he was holding something. It was a green-plush box. He wondered what the box was. It was probably something, he could not remember what.

He put the box in the pocket of his coat, found a rocking chair, sat down and went to sleep.

V

THE PLUSH BOX

Org walked back to the bayou under the escort of Mustard Prophet. He seemed unable to take his eyes off of Little Bit's shiny black skin. He was slow to overcome his amazement at his discovery that a negro was black all over.

When they were riding home in big Mustard's farm-wagon, he referred to it again.

"You're a negro, ain't you, Little Bit?" he asked, speaking in a softly apologetic tone, as if fearing to cause offense.

"Suttin!" Little Bit laughed. "I's a black Affikin nigger. Anybody dat looks how dark com-plected I is kin see dat."

"I never saw many colored persons in my life," Org explained.

"You ain't had no eyes ef you ain't seed no niggers," Little Bit chuckled. "Niggers is eve'y-whar. Gawd made 'em in de night, made 'em in a hurry an' fergot to make 'em white. Dar's niggers in heaven, an' dars even plenty niggers in hell."

At the Shin Bone eating-house, Mustard helped Popsy Spout down from the wagon and the two boys jumped to the ground. Popsy entered the restaurant, walked feebly over to a table and seated himself with a thankful sigh. He took out his pipe and placed it upon the table at his elbow, then spread a red bandana handkerchief over his head to keep the flies from disturbing him. Then he sank into a restful state of dreamy inanity, his mind just as near empty as it is possible for anything to be, considering the fact that nature abhors a vacuum.

In one corner of the room, the proprietor, Shin Bone, was engaged in some interesting experiments with loaded dice. He seemed never weary of his task as he rolled the cubes across the table, retrieved them again, and repeated. He tried to familiarize himself with their vagaries, to study their oddities and eccentricities, and in his imagination he planned many victories and great winnings through the aid of these pet bones.

The process was absorbing to him. His eyes

popped out, the whites showing in a wide ring. His breathing was quick and husky as he shook the dice, and he muttered prayers and imprecations and incantations. Sometimes he threw the dice with one hand, sometimes with the other; he used certain luck charms, changing them from one pocket to the other, practising and experimenting with every sort of "conjure," for he expected those little white cubes with the black spots to bring him the money with which to make a loud noise in Tickfall colored society.

Popsy roused himself from his dreamy vacuity and felt in his pocket for his tobacco-pouch. He would take a little smoke before dinner. He found the tobacco-pouch, also something else.

He brought forth a green-plush box and looked at it curiously. He opened it with hands which shook from senile palsy and examined its contents. It was a rabbit-foot surmounted with a silver cap on one end. He wondered where he had acquired the thing.

"Come here, Shinny!" he called. "Look whut I done found on myse'f."

Shin Bone crossed the room, gazed at the treasure for a moment, and gave a surprised grunt.

"Whar did you git dis rabbit-foot?" he inquired suspiciously.

"I dunno, Shinny," the old man replied in a complaining voice. "Whut is it fur?"

"Lots of folks has rabbit-foots," Shin said. "I

don't b'lieve in 'em. I got four, an' dey don't fotch me no luck. Whar did you git dis'n?"

"I dunno."

"Whar you been at to-day?" Shin asked.

"Well, suh, early dis mawnin' I went to de Shoofly chu'ch an' conversed de Revun Vinegar Atts a little; atter dat, I went out to de Nigger-Heel wid Mustard Prophet—ah—dat's whar I got dis here foot. Mustard gib it to me. He es-plained a whole lot about it an' tole me dat Marse Tom gib it to him, an' he passed it on."

"Whut yo gwine do wid it?" Shin asked.

"'Tain't no good to me," Popsy whined, working at his tobacco-pouch and shaking some tobacco in his hand. "De only luck-charm I b'lieves in is de chu'ch. Ef de good Lawd is on yo' side, who kin be agin you?"

Shin Bone knew better than to get Popsy started in a discussion of religion. His conversation on that theme was interminable. Besides, the plush box lying on the table between them had awakened several interesting trains of thought:

First, he knew Popsy had a trick of putting things into his pocket and walking off with them, forgetting where he acquired them, and even failing to remember what they were for. Second, he remembered that Mustard Prophet had often attributed much of his good fortune to the possession of a rabbit-foot. Thirdly, he knew that Colonel Gaitskill also had a rabbit-foot, for he had often

heard him refer to it in his hearing and in the presence of the other negroes.

Now, did Popsy inadvertently take possession of Gaitskill's rabbit-foot? Or did he absent-mindedly walk off with Mustard's foot? Or did Mustard give his famous luck-charm away? Shin doubted this last supposition. If a luck-charm is good, it is very, very good. Or did Mustard steal Gaitskill's rabbit-foot and Popsy take it from Mustard?

Popsy lighted his pipe and began to smoke. Shin Bone decided that he could make nothing of the mystery. A rabbit-foot was no good to him. He had tried them before. But loaded dice, now—he pulled the "bones" from his pocket and renewed his former operations.

In the kitchen a bell rang. A number of patrons who had been lingering outside came through the door and seated themselves at the table. Shin Bone arose to bring in the dinner. Popsy knocked the ashes from his pipe and got ready to eat.

As for Org and Little Bit, they did not get back to the Gaitskill home until the sun had sunk below the line of the tree-tops. And not until Orren Randolph Gaitskill beheld his sister sitting upon the porch did he think of the errand on which she had sent him ten hours before.

His small hand investigated his trouser-pocket, to see if he was still in possession of the fifty-cent piece. He might have lost it when he tossed

aside his garments on the banks of the Cooley bayou.

"Org!" Virginia called sharply. "Where are those stamps?"

Org's nervous fingers caressed the half-dollar in his pocket. His mind reached out like the tentacles of an octopus, grasping after an excuse.

"Where are my stamps?" she repeated.

"Er—ah—I went down-town," Org began. "I went down-town—and—er—ah—Miss Paunee, that mustang woman in the post-office—she told me—she said——"

"Well?" Virginia's tone was icy.

"Miss Paunee—she told me—ah—she said she didn't have no two-cent stamps; she had sold out."

If the glance of a sister's eye could kill, most brothers would now be dead. Org survived the look she gave him, and sheepishly offered her the fifty-cent piece.

"You don't need no stamps, Gince," Org said soothingly. "Them guys you left behind ain't worth writing letters to."

"Please keep your opinions to yourself," his sister advised. "Where have you spent the day?"

"I have been to the Nigger-Heel plantation with Little Bit. Little Bit is a colored person and a very good friend. A colored man named Mustard took me out in a wagon and brought me back,"

Org informed her. Then eagerly: "Say, Gince, do you know that a negro is black all over his body, even under his clothes?"

"Where did you meet these blacks?" Virginia asked, avoiding Org's question as to the color-line.

"I met Little Bit at the foot of the hill. He told me he was the captain's white negro. I met Mustard Prophet in front of the Hen-Scratch saloon in Dirty-Six. We picked up Popsy Spout at Shin Bone's hot-cat stand in Hell's Half-Acre!"

Under this appalling summary of information, Miss Virginia reeled back in dismay.

"No doubt," she said weakly.

"If you want to save stamps, Gince," Org suggested eagerly, "you better write to Little Bit's captain and let me carry the notes for you. I saw the captain when we were coming home. He's got a' automobile as big as a street-car. He was in the army and a German shot him——"

A slight flush appeared on Miss Virginia's cheek. It spread slowly, like the unfurling of some flag—the star-spangled banner for instance.

"I don't care to hear the personal history of the acquaintances you have made to-day," Miss Virginia interrupted.

"His name is Captain Kerley Kerlerac, Gince," Org persisted. "Little Bit told me. Little Bit, my colored friend, is the captain's pet coon."

VI

THE RAFT

In Tickfall, religion was reduced to the least common divisor. That is to say, there was one church for the white people and one for the black. The white children felt that they were imposed upon by the older and more dominating members of their families in that they were made to go to Sunday-school, whereas, the black children were permitted by their parents to grow up in that ignorance which is bliss.

Org had no particular love for religious instruction. All the time that he was trying to learn a sufficient portion of that day's lesson to satisfy his teacher, he was thinking of a buzzard's nest which Little Bit had told him about, a buzzard's nest which contained two baby buzzards, both of them white as snow. If that buzzard's nest had been concealed in some Sunday-school book—but Org never found anything interesting in a Sunday-school book. What little he knew of that day's portion of the Scripture had been imparted to him by the laborious efforts of his sister, and he was now walking down the hill toward the church, mumbling his newly acquired information to himself.

"Whar you gwine, Marse Org?"

"Sunday-school. Come and go with me."

"Ain't fitten," Little Bit giggled. "A little black coon like me ain't got no place in a white chu'ch. Excusin' dat, I janitors in a saloon, an' Sunday-schools ain't made fer such."

"I'll tell you all I know about the lesson," Org urged. "Listen: Methusalem—oldest man ever was: nine hundred and sixty-nine years old—was not, for God took him—gathered to his fathers——"

"How ole you say he wus gwine on when he died?" Little Bit asked.

"Nine hundred and sixty-nine years."

"Whoop-ee! Whut did de ole gizzard die of when he died?"

"I dunno," Org replied. "He died of smoking cigarettes, I reckon. If you go with me, we'll ask the teacher."

"I mought stan' outside behime de chu'ch while you axed," Little Bit said doubtfully. "Who am dis here teacher?"

"Captain Kerley Kerlerac."

"I ain't gwine to no Sondag-school to ax my boss nothin'," Little Bit said positively. "Dat white man don't 'low no niggers to pesticate him wid 'terrogations. I knows!"

Org was not willing to part with his companion. He could have a great deal more fun with Little Bit than he could contemplating the career of a man who had lived nearly a thousand years and had been dead for several thousand more. Be-

sides, he was a little skeptical of the alleged age of that old party. So when Org came to a corner where he should have turned to the right, he turned to the left, and from that time on there was a vacant chair in the Sunday-school.

The old cotton-shed on the edge of the Gaitskill sand pit was the first thing to attract the attention of the pair. In that storehouse, they found an old cotton-truck, and a door which had been torn off the hinges and was lying on the floor near the office.

They found amusement for a while by pulling each other around on the truck. Then they sat down in the door to cool off and gazed out over an expanse of water which formed a shallow pond in the sand pit.

"If we could get this old broken-down door over to that pond, we could have a raft to ride on," Org remarked.

"'Tain't no trouble," Little Bit replied. "Jes' load de door onto de cotton-truck an' push de truck down to de pond."

"You are certainly intell'gent, Little Bit," Org exclaimed admiringly as he sprang to his feet.

"Pushin' things an' liftin' things an' loadin' things—dat's a cullud pusson's nachel-bawn job," Little Bit chuckled. "'Tain't no trouble fer a nigger to think up dat."

"Let's get this door on the truck and move our raft," Org urged.

It was not hard to do. The pine door was not very heavy, and from the time they got it out of the building, the route was down hill to the edge of the pond. They pushed the truck into the water, easily floated the door off, and then tugged mightily to drag the truck back to the empty storehouse again.

They found two long poles which would serve to steer with, and raced back to the edge of the pond and climbed aboard their raft.

The door sustained them just as long as most of their weight was on their poles, and they were trying to push off. At last they worked their raft out to about four feet of water and felt free to lift their steering-poles and ride.

Then that door slowly sank under their weight until the water was up to their knees, to their waists, to their shoulders. It stopped in its downward journey when it rested on the sandy bottom, and the two lads stood on it, looking at each other with the utmost astonishment, raising their chins to keep the water out of their mouths.

"You done got yo' nice Sunday clothes all wet," Little Bit sighed.

"Yours are wet, too," Org retorted.

"Dis here is my eve'y-day suit. I ain't got no all-Sunday gyarments. I wears dese ladylike clothes all de time."

"I'm sorry you spoilt your only suit," Org sympathized.

“ ‘Tain’t spiled—it’s jes’ wet,” Little Bit replied. “Whut is us gwine do now?”

“We’re both wet. We might as well have a good time,” Org suggested philosophically.

“I likes good times an’ dis’n is started off real good,” Little Bit laughed. “You git offen dis ole door an’ le’s see ef it will hold me up.”

VII

LOST BOYS

About four o’clock that afternoon somebody in the Gaitskill home asked where Orren Randolph Gaitskill was. He had not been seen since he left the house that morning to attend the Sunday-school.

Miss Virginia Gaitskill called Captain Kerley Kerlerac on the telephone and asked if Orren had been in his class that morning.

When a devilish boy happens to be the brother of an angelic girl, even a disillusioned war-veteran finds that lad possessed of qualities which he loves and admires for the boy’s sister’s sake.

Kerlerac informed her that he had missed Orren very much, that he was the brightest boy in his class, that all the others had made anxious inquiry about him, that he was about to call at the Gaitskill home to inquire if Orren was sick.

The answer which he heard to this panegyric was a giggle.

"Hello! Hello! What's that?" he exclaimed.

The telephone clicked in his ear, indicating that she had hung up the receiver.

Kerley stood at the telephone scratching his head, a wry smile on his lips.

"I believe that giggle meant that she called me a liar," he announced to his immortal soul. A reminiscent light beamed in his eyes. "She hasn't changed in the past fifteen years—little spitfire!"

For half an hour Miss Virginia found something else to think about besides her wandering brother, but as the evening wore on, and he did not appear, she began to get uneasy again.

"That dang boy has played hookey and gone out in the woods with that pickaninny," Colonel Gaitskill announced.

"Oh, maybe he's lost in the swamp!" Virginia gasped.

"No danger of that," Gaitskill said easily. "These little niggers around here can go across that swamp like a fox. They can't get lost."

But as the shadows lengthened across the Gaitskill lawn the women of the household were thrown into a panic. They insisted that it was not a natural or ordinary thing for Orren to miss his meals; that a hungry boy might be having a very good time at some amusement, but he would always be willing to postpone his play to eat, resuming his play after this meal.

"That's so," Gaitskill admitted. "When I was

a boy nothing was ever more attractive to me than the consumption of food, and I enjoy being regular at my meals now. But, maybe he ate his lunch somewhere else?"

By telephone they made inquiry of every place where they thought Orren could have eaten. He had not been seen at any of those places.

Gaitskill saw that he was going to have to get out and hunt that boy. The prospect did not appeal to him. That boy was a nuisance. If he was lost, it was good riddance. He wasn't worth finding—let him find himself. He went to the telephone and called up Captain Kerley Kerlerac.

"Say, Kerl, where's that damn little pet nigger of yours?"

"Haven't seen him to-day, Colonel."

"He's run off somewhere with Orren, and Orren hasn't come home yet."

"I'll find him," Kerley said eagerly.

"Oh, no! Don't trouble yourself," Gaitskill smiled. "I just wanted to know about Little Bit."

Gaitskill sat down with a sly grin. He was getting old, he reflected, and the strenuous life was no longer attractive. If a searching party should have to be organized, he had now laid its foundation. It was a certainty that Kerlerac would organize the party and lead the search. Good old Kerl would see that Virginia's brother was not lost.

It does not take a rumor long to spread over a

little village. In a brief time, it was known to the remotest parts of Tickfall that Little Bit and Orren Gaitskill were lost.

Little Bit's mother, in spite of the fact that she had fourteen others just like him in her cabin, aroused all the negro section of the town by her frantic wails. She announced in a voice like a calliope that she knew that her angel child had fallen into a well, had been eaten by an alligator, had been bitten by a snake, had been drowned in a bayou, had been stolen and carried away by white folks, had been lost in the swamp—and she howled like a banshee over each one of these possibilities, and others of the same general nature as she thought of them.

A great bellow of excitement went up from all the negroes, and a band of them hurried to the home of Captain Kerlerac to inquire the latest information about Little Bit. Their excitement was contagious, and the captain caught it, the white citizens of the town were inoculated, and in an incredibly short time the town was seething with an intense desire to organize a search-party and explore the woods for the lost boys.

"We'll wait until night, men," Kerlerac said. "If the boys don't come in by dark, we will go out on the Little Moccasin Road and build fires on the highway for ten miles. Wherever they may be in the swamp, they will see that trail of fire and come to it."

"That's the way to do it," several approving voices spoke.

"Don't bother Colonel Gaitskill with it," Kerley suggested. "He's getting too old to be running around at night and exposing himself. If the boys don't come in by dark, I will ring the court-house bell. Meet me there."

It had not been very long since Kerlerac had been a boy himself. He knew every spot in that vicinity which was dear to boys, white and black. He listed each one in his mind and started on a lone search to each of these places.

His automobile carried him first to all the swimming-holes, then to the old picnic-grounds, then to the old tabernacle, where the negro camp-meetings were held, to the pool where the colored members of the Shoofly church conducted their baptizings, to the old stables and sheds around the fair-grounds. Finally, he left his machine beside the road and walked across the field to the old cotton-shed beside the sand pit.

The noise of shouting and laughter came to him before he arrived upon the scene. It was no trouble to locate the two boys as they splashed and paddled and fought with water and dived to the bottom to rise with a handful of sand to throw at each other.

Time had ceased to move for those two youngsters. Sunrise and sunset were just the same to them. A score of apple-cores strewn along the

sandy shore indicated that they had lunched well and were not hungry.

"Hey, you!" Kerley called.

The two boys looked up with surprise.

"Come out of that water!" Kerley commanded.

"Don't you know it is nearly night?"

The astonishment on their faces when informed of the passage of time indicated that they had been completely engrossed with their amusement.

They climbed out of the water near Kerlerac and gave that gentleman a surprise.

"You've both got on your clothes!" he exclaimed.

"Are you too lazy to strip when you take a Sunday swim?"

"Naw, suh. But our fust swim wus a mistake, Marse Cap'n," Little Bit chattered, chilled by the wind after his day of activity in the water. "Us got on a raff an' de raff wouldn't hol' us up."

"Don't report to me," Kerley laughed. "March along home now! Right face! Forward!"

A little later Kerlerac marched the two wet youngsters upon the lawn and made them stand at attention in the presence of a dozen hysterical women.

"Here are your mud-cats, Colonel," he smiled.

"I found them paddling in the pond in the old sand pit."

"I didn't intend to get wet, Uncle Tom," Org began, "but the raft was not large enough——"

"That's enough for you," Gaitskill cut him off. "Go around to the rear of the house."

Miss Virginia Gaitskill stood upon the steps smiling.

"I think I knew you once, Miss Gaitskill," Kerlerac said. "We were both younger then."

"You were seven and I was five," Virginia smiled, as she extended her hand.

"I remember," Kerlerac answered. "You gave me a chocolate rat with a rubber tail. I could hold the tail and bounce the rat, or I could lay the rat down and watch it wiggle its tail very lifelike. I ate that rat, rubber-tail and all."

"You gave me a rabbit-foot in a green-plush box," Virginia laughed. "I did not eat the foot or the box. I have them both yet."

"I have something that you did not give me," Kerlerac said earnestly. "I stole it from you. I carried it through three battles across the sea. It is your picture as you were then."

"Have I changed since then?" the girl asked, because she did not know what else to say.

"Yes. The photograph I have of you shows a little spitfire girl astride of a wobble-wheeled velocipede."

"Oh—" that young lady gasped.

VIII

THE LOST FOOT

A moving-picture of the performances of Mustard Prophet when he discovered the loss of his rabbit-foot would be a valuable contribution to the silent drama. Alone in that big plantation-house, with no one to talk to, he spluttered with language like an erupting volcano, and cut as many capers as a cat having a fit.

After that he mounted the fastest horse on his plantation and rode to town, sweeping down upon his wife like a cyclone of wrath and fear and consternation.

"Dat ole bat stole dat rabbit-foot," Mustard bellowed.

"I don't b'lieve it," Hopey replied, trying to soothe him. "Dat's a good ole man."

"He's a good ole stealer," Mustard howled. "He knows how to rob de hen-roost an' hide de feathers. Lawd, when I think how heavy he sets in de amen cornder of de Shoofly meetin'-house, singin' religion toons an' foolin' de people all de time—I tell you dat nigger ought to be churched!"

"But I don't see what he wanted to take dat rabbit-foot fer," Hopey declared. "He's tole me plenty times dat he didn't b'lieve in fooks; he b'lieves in faith."

"It's wuth a thousan' dollars—dat how come

he took it!" Mustard bawled. "Mebbe it's wuth a millyum; how does I know? Marse Tom, he's got it all fixed up wid silver trimmin's an' in a plush box. Dat ain't no cheap, common, nigger rabbit-foot. Dat's a royal rabbit-foot, an' it fotch Marse Tom all de luck he ever had. He tole me dat his own self."

"Why don't you go to Popsy an' ax him fer it?"

"Dat ole lyin' thief will say he ain't got it, an' ain't never had it, an' don't know nothin' about it," Mustard wailed. "Atter dat, whar is I at?"

"Tell him dat it b'longs to Marse Tom, an' you want it back," Hopey urged.

"Yep. An' dat ole gizzard will swell up an' sw'ar he ain't got nothin' of Marse Tom's an' offer to go down to de bank an' prove it befo' Marse Tom's own face. I don't dast let Marse Tom know I done loss dat rabbit-foot. De kunnel would kill me dead!"

"I never thought of dat," Hopey sighed.

"You don't think about nothin'," Mustard wailed. "Here I is in de wuss mess I'm ever got into, an' you ain't think about nothin'. Look at dis here jam. If Marse Tom finds out I loss de rabbit-foot, he'll kill me; ef I ax dat ole Popsy-sneak to gib it back, mebbe he'll blab dat it's lost, an' Marse Tom will hear about it, an' I'll git kilt jes' de same. Anyhow, dat foot is plum gone an'——"

"Why don't you git somebody to git it back fer

you?" Hopey asked. "Ef Popsy stole it, it 'pears to me like somebody oughter be able to steal it back."

"Suttinly, ef dey kin find it," Mustard said, the light of new hope shining in his eyes. "I'd gib somebody one hundred dollars to steal it back fer me agin."

"Dat's plenty lib'ral," Hopey said. "Mebbe ef you'll hunt aroun' you kin find somebody."

Mustard quieted down and gave himself to deep meditation, trying to think of someone sufficiently bold to hold up Popsy and extract the treasure from his pocket.

Hopey took this opportunity to leave the room. She had heard a great deal from Mustard, and she did not care to be around when he began to mourn and lament again. She was a fat woman, and desired calm environments, and sought the ways of peace. Moreover, she did not attribute the same value to the rabbit-foot that Mustard did. It seemed to her that Gaitskill had given it to Mustard to keep for his own, and that he cared nothing for it, had forgotten all about it; he could not attach much importance to its possession when he had never made inquiry about it in all the time that Mustard had guarded it so zealously.

But Mustard was the best negro overseer in Louisiana for this reason as much as any other: he took care of things, regarded his employer's property as more valuable even than his own, and

everything belonging to Marse Tom was to be kept in order for the day when he should give an account of his stewardship.

After a while, Hopey thought of her friend, Dazzle Zenor. Dazzle had good sense, possessed the wisdom which comes from many varied experiences, and she would be able to help her now. She heard certain noises in the next room, which indicated that Mustard was getting ready to explode again, so she hastily left the house and went to town.

Dazzle lived in Ginny Babe Chew's boarding-house in Dirty-Six. So Hopey climbed pantingly to the second floor of this house and knocked on her door.

"Who's dat?"

"Hopey Prophet is done come on bizzness. Open dis door!"

"Whut you come to see me fur?" Dazzle asked promptly, after she had admitted Hopey.

Dazzle was a woman who met all the exactions of Ethiopian beauty. Her skin as black as jet, her teeth like milk, her eyes so dark that they had a bluish tinge, slim and strong and graceful, an actress, a dancer, a singer, she was the dusky belle of Tickfall. Every negro man who had married anybody in the past four years had first proposed to and been rejected by Dazzle.

Many of Dazzle's enterprises were highly adventurous, and she was always fearful and sus-

picious. So when Hopey hesitated to begin, Dazzle's tone became sharp with anxiety:

"Whut you come to see me fur?" she repeated.

"I come to consult wid you about a little scrape our fambly is got into, Dazzle," Hopey began. "Us is liable to hab plenty trouble onless somebody kin he'p us."

"Whut's done busted loose now?" Dazzle asked easily. Her mind was now at rest, for nothing that could happen to Hopey's family could impinge on any of Dazzle's previous escapades.

"Mustard is done loss his rabbit-foot!" Hopey exclaimed in tragic tones.

Dazzle laughed.

"I'll gib Mustard a hatful of dem things. I'm got about twenty."

"But dis here is a royal rabbit-foot," Hopey said with emphasis.

"I never heerd of dat kind, but 'tain't no 'count whutever it is," Dazzle smiled. "I done tried all kinds, an' I knows."

"But dis rabbit-foot b'longed to Marse Tom Gaitskill," Hopey informed her, "an' Mustard lost it, an' Marse Tom will kill Mustard ef he don't git it back."

"No doubts," Dazzle chuckled. "White folks ain't got no real good sense, an' nobody cain't tell whut dey will do."

Then Dazzle listened while Hopey told the tale of the disappearance of the rabbit-foot. Dazzle

was not much impressed with this story of another's misfortune, but at the last one sentence stimulated her interest:

"Mustard says he will pay one hundred dollars to whoever gits his foot back."

That was speaking in language which Dazzle could understand. She sprang to her feet.

"I'll earn dat hundred dollars right now," Dazzle proclaimed. "I'll go out to Popsy's cabin an' pull his nose till he gibs up dat foot."

"'Tain't possible, Dazzle," Hopey said. "We don't want Marse Tom to know dat de foot is lost. Ef you go to pullin' noses an' skinnin' shins, Popsy will beller, an' Marse Tom will hear about dat."

"He'd shore howl," Dazzle agreed, reluctantly abandoning that plan. "Well, I'll go out and make love to dat ole man, an' sneak de rabbit-foot outen his pocket."

"Any way will do dat will git de foot back 'thout makin' too much of a rookus, Dazzle," Hopey said. "We don't want no row, no nigger scrape, no loud noise, and no white folks mixin' in."

"White folks is shore good mixers," Dazzle said, wincing at the recollection of several plans of hers which had been rudely frustrated by the interference of the whites. "I'll see whut I kin do."

IX

SKEETER BUTTS

At the time that Hopey was in conversation with Dazzle Zenor, Mustard was in deep thought. At last a name came into his darkened and troubled mind which was like a blaze of light illuminating all his perplexities: "Skeeter Butts!"

Ten minutes later he entered the Hen-Scratch saloon and was told that the man he sought was in a little room in the rear.

"I'm shore glad to find you so easy, Skeeter," Mustard said in a relieved tone. "Ef you had been out of town I would hab fotch' my troubles to you jes' the same, whar you wus."

"Dis is whar you gits exputt advices on ev'y-thing," Skeeter laughed as he sat down and lighted a cigarette.

Why is it that people make confidants of bar-keeps?

And whom will we tell our troubles to when the world is made safe for prohibition?

Skeeter was a saddle-colored, dapper, petite negro, the dressiest man of any color who ever lived in Tickfall. His hair was always closely clipped, the part made in the middle of his head with a razor. His collars were so high that they made him look like a jackass, with his chin hanging over a whitewashed fence. His clothes were

so loud that they invariably proclaimed the man a block away.

He was the "pet nigger" of all the well-to-do white people in the town, who invariably took him upon their hunting and fishing trips; his dancing, singing, gift of mimicry, and certain histrionic gifts had given him a place in many amateur theatrical exhibitions in Tickfall, among both whites and blacks; and with all his monkey trickery he, nevertheless, had the confidence of all the white people, and could walk in and out of more houses without a question being asked as to the reason for his presence there than any white or black in the little village.

Among the negroes he was Sir Oracle. He was matrimonial adjuster in courtship, marriage, and divorce; he was confidential adviser at baptisms and funerals; his expert advice was sought in all matters pertaining to lodge and church and social functions. In short, he represented in Tickfall colored society what Colonel Gaitskill did among the white people.

"Dis is whar you gits exputt advices on eve'y-thing," Skeeter laughed, for he knew his standing among his people.

"I don't want advices. I wants a hold-up man," Mustard said gloomily.

"How come?"

"A feller stole somepin from me, an' I wants somebody to steal it back," Mustard explained.

"Bawl out wid it," Skeeter snapped. "Don't go beatin' de bush aroun' de debbil. Talk sense!"

Mustard hesitated for a long time, opened his mouth once or twice as if about to speak, shook his head, and seemed to think better of it.

"Well," Skeeter snapped, "why don't you tell it?"

"I don't know how to begin," Mustard sighed.

"Begin at de fust part an' tell dat fust," Skeeter ranted. "Is you been hittin' Marse Tom's bottle?"

Under this sort of prodding, continued for some time longer, Skeeter finally got Mustard started, and got the story. It is not necessary to repeat it, although Mustard's way of telling what happened and what he thought of Popsy would be interesting.

"An' now, Skeeter," Mustard concluded, "de idear is dis: Popsy stole my rabbit-foot, an' I want you to steal it back. Rob de ole man of my foot an' fotch it back to me, an' I'll gib you one hundred dollars."

"Pay in eggsvance?" Skeeter asked eagerly.

"No," Mustard said.

"Bestow a little money in eggsvance to keep my mind int'rusted."

"Suttinly. Ten dollars cash down—you got to pay it back ef you don't do no good."

"I'll git de foot all right," Skeeter said confidently.

"Don't be too shore, Skeeter," Mustard warned

him. "You might git in jail, an' ef you does, don't ax me to he'p you."

"You means to say ef I bust into ole Popsy's cabin an' steal de foot, an' he gits me arrested, you won't esplain nothin' to de cote-house?"

"Nary a single esplain!" Mustard proclaimed solemnly. "Dat's jes' whut I means. I ain't gwine git mixed up in dis no way an' no how! Ef you gits in jail, I won't open my mouth ef dey hangs you on a tree."

Skeeter pulled out of his pocket the ten-dollar bill which Mustard had just given him and spread it out upon his knee, smoothing it with his yellow fingers.

"Gimme fo' more ten-dollar bills to spread out on top of dis tenner," Skeeter commanded.

Mustard promptly handed over the money.

"Dis here detecative stealin' job is a risky bizzness," Skeeter proclaimed. "I ain't never got at nothin' yit as dangersome."

"I knows it, Skeeter," Mustard agreed gloomily. "Ef you ain't keerful, you'll git a bullet in you; an' ef dat sad misforchine happens to you I won't even come to yo' fun'ral. I ain't gwine mix wid dis at all."

Mustard arose, walked through the barroom, climbed upon his horse, and departed for the Nigger-Heel plantation.

Skeeter sat for a long time, considering all that Mustard had told him, the money still spread out

upon his knee. Then he arose and pocketed the money, walked out to the rear, and sat down in a chair under his favorite china-berry tree.

Two boys up the street diverted his attention for a moment. They had a long, black bullwhip, and were taking turn-about trying to see who could "pop" it the loudest. The "cracker" on the whip was nearly worn off, and they decided to plait an entirely new cracker, one that would pop like a pistol. Neither had a pocket-knife, and they could find nothing with which to remove the old cracker. They tried to saw it off with a piece of sharp glass, abandoned that in favor of a piece of sharp-edged tin can, then took a sharp rock and tried to beat it off.

When they saw Skeeter Butts they swooped down on him.

"Lend us de loant of yo' pocket-knife, Skeeter," Little Bit asked.

Skeeter thrust his hand into his pocket, found nothing, and answered:

"I left it inside de barroom. I'm glad of it, because you's be shore to cut yourselfs."

Skeeter leaned his chair against the tree, sat down, and placed the heels of his shoes in the front rungs of the chair, tipped his hat down over his eyes until the bridge of his nose was invisible, and sat motionless. Except the tiny column of smoke that curled up from his cigarette, there was scarcely a sign of life.

The two boys wandered around to the front of the saloon. Then a bright idea came to Little Bit:

"Marse Org, less git a match an' burn de cracker offen dis ole whup."

"Where's the match?"

Little Bit led him into the saloon and conducted him to the little room in the rear. There, upon a table, they found a box of matches, and Org struck one and applied it to the cracker, while Little Bit held the whip.

The cracker easily caught fire and burned freely. When it was near to the rawhide end of the lash Little Bit gave the whip a quick jerk and the flaming cracker flew off the end. The boys laughed at the success of their plan, picked up a handful of twine strings which lay around the floor, and walked out.

Boylke, they never looked to see where the flaming cracker went. They didn't care where it went. They didn't want it. They went out the way they had come, and ran up the street and far away.

Skeeter was undisturbed until Dazzle Zenor passed and roused him.

"I got a big job befo' me," she said.

"Me, too," Skeeter replied.

"My job am a secret," Dazzle offered.

"Mine, too," Skeeter responded.

"I's fixin' to make a good bunch of money," Dazzle boasted.

"I'll either make money or git in jail," Skeeter said. "I'm got a detecative job."

"My job is harder," Dazzle smiled. "I pick pockets."

"I bet you is flirtin' wid a jail, too," Skeeter asserted.

"Mebbe so. I cain't tell you no more——"

Suddenly she stopped and stared at the closed door in the rear of the saloon through which tiny spirals of smoke were issuing by way of the cracks.

"Is you fumigatin', Skeeter?" she asked.

"Fumigatin' whut?" Skeeter asked, then ran to the door and threw it open.

The room was filled with smoke and a pile of old trash and newspapers in one corner was ablaze.

With a loud whoop, Skeeter and Dazzle ran through the smoke to the fire; from the door which entered into the barroom, Figger Bush came in with a bucket of water, yelling like a wild man. It was all over in a minute.

"Good-by, Skeeter!" Dazzle laughed. "Mebbe us'll meet in jail."

"Dat fire is a bad sign for me, Dazzle," Skeeter sighed. "Troubles is gittin' ready to happen to me."

"Things will shore happen whar a white boy an' a pickaninny monkeys aroun'," Dazzle told him.

X

RABBIT TOBACCO

When the inveterate smoker throws away a pipe, it may be safely presumed that the pipe has some potency. A briar-root sweetens with age, mellowing and ripening in its own nicotine, and then it becomes impossible. So it happened that Colonel Gaitskill was compelled to an act of abandonment. The pipe that had solaced him for years was hurled far over in a clump of weeds in the horse-pasture.

One pair of sharp eyes saw the act of abandonment and watched to see where the pipe fell. One pair of nimble feet carried their owner to the spot where the forsaken thing had fallen. A pair of eager hands laid hold upon it, and Orren Randolph Gaitskill found himself in proud possession of a real pipe.

If Orren's Sunday-school teacher had arrived at that particular moment and had been disposed to instruct this youth upon the injurious effects of nicotine, he could have run a broom-straw down the stem of that pipe and brought it out all black and shiny with poison. Finding a cat who never had smoked, did not even "chaw," he could have forced that straw between pussy's teeth, drawing it lengthwise through the sides of her mouth, thus wiping off the nicotine upon her tongue. He could then have waited a few minutes and had a

free show for himself and Orren Randolph Gaitskill: the exhibition of a suffering cat, dying miserably in a fit.

But, no! Orren had not the remotest idea of permitting a cat, or even a Sunday-school teacher, to share the delights of that pipe with him. He intended to smoke it in exclusive partnership with his colored friend, Little Bit.

Orren found Little Bit sitting on a curb-stone in front of the Hen-Scratch saloon, and exhibited the treasure.

"Dat's a purty good pipe, but whar's yo' ter-backer?" Little Bit asked.

"You ought to furnish that," Org replied. "I've got the pipe and the matches."

"I ain't got none."

"Don't yo' mammy smoke?"

"Naw. She dips."

"Don't your father smoke?"

"Ain't got no paw. He's daid."

"Well, then: can't you borrow a little tobacco from some of your friends?"

"Ain't got no frien's, excusin' you."

"What about Skeeter Butts?"

"He ain't no frien' of our'n. He's mad at us because we sot his saloom on fire wid dat hot whup-cracker."

"I never saw a colored person with as little as you have," Orren said irascibly. "You haven't got nothin'."

"Dat's a fack. Dat's de nachel way niggers is. But I knows whar dar is plenty rabbit terbacker."

"That's as good as any, I'm sure," Org said. "Lead me to it."

A short distance on the edge of the town, Little Bit led Org into a wide pasture, along the edge of which there ran a little branch. He hunted a few minutes in search of a plant which is known in other places as "life everlasting," but in Louisiana is called "rabbit tobacco."

This can be said for it: the oldest pipe-user, dying for want of a smoke, will not smoke the weed called life everlasting. He lets rabbit tobacco alone. It has the flavor and the odor of tobacco. It also has an effect, when used, which invariably reminds every man of the time when he smoked his first cigar.

"Dar she is!" Little Bit exclaimed, pouncing upon a dry weed. "Dis here plant will gib us a plenty."

He stripped off the dry leaves, crushed them in his hands and, assisted by Org, he packed the pipe-bowl. They walked to the edge of a little thicket and sat down upon a convenient log to enjoy their smoke. A long, level pasture stretched out before them, dotted here and there with grazing cattle, ending across the way with a rail fence, beside which grew a row of trees.

Org produced a box of matches, laid it upon the ground beside him, and reached out for the pipe.

"I'll light up and smoke awhile, Little Bit. Then I'll pass it to you."

"Hit away, Marse Org. I ain't really hankerin' fer no pipe-smoke. I likes cigareets best. But I'll go it a puff or two, ef you'll puff fust."

Org lighted the pipe and was charmed at the ease with which he could draw the smoke through the stem. The smoke was exceptionally sweet and cooling to the tongue, like the flavor of ether, although Org had never tasted that volatile fluid. He took four or five hearty puffs, and then felt that it was time to introduce his black friend to this charming and delightful accomplishment.

Little Bit had counted the number of times that Org had blown the smoke from his lips and he had too much regard for his "raisin'" to puff a single time more than his white companion. After four draws he handed back the pipe.

Org reached for it with a disinterested hand. He held the pipe listlessly and gazed out dreamily upon the level meadow with eyes which saw little and comprehended less and were not interested in that. Then the pipe dropped from his hands, and Org opened his eyes wide, as he suddenly beheld the entire pasture with all its grazing cattle, the fence with the trees at the far end—everything, in fact, rise up in the air and dance high above his head!

Org leaned back so far to behold the last of this phenomenon that he fell off the log and lay prone upon the ground.

"Whut ails you, Marse Org?" Little Bit asked solicitously. "Is de worl' done turned down-side up fer you, too?"

Little Bit arose with the intention of helping his white companion, the entire earth tipped and rolled over on him and pushed him over the log, where he lay holding to the ground to keep from being pitched off.

One hour later the two boys crawled up on the log and sat down, trembling, weak, beyond any weakness they had ever experienced.

"I guess we got poisoned with something, Little Bit," Org remarked. "I feel pretty bad."

"Dar ain't been many cullud folks as sick as I wus an' lived through it," Little Bit replied with weak boastfulness. "Niggers is like a mule: dey don't git sick but one time an' atter dat, dey die. I wus wuss off in de last hour dan I ever is been. It muss hab been somepin I et."

"I been heap sicker than you were," Org declared. "You lived through it—you say so yourself. But me, I'm dying now!"

"Dis ain't no fitten place to die, Marse Org," Little Bit protested. "De buzzards will eat us up out here all unbeknownst to nobody. Less mosey back to town whar people kin see us die an' keep de buzzards off."

"Less hurry. I ain't got long to live," Org declared.

"We moves now," Little Bit sighed miserably. "Dis wus shore a narrer escapement fer us."

Locomotion was a difficult task for both of them. They were glad when they came to the fence and could use a stick with one hand and cling to the fence with the other. When they reached the road, they made wild and desperate gestures and stopped a little automobile.

"Whar you fellers been at?" Skeeter Butts asked as he opened the door for them to climb in beside him. "You look all peeked up."

"Me an' Marse Org, we been smokin' rabbit terbacker," Little Bit told him.

"Ho! Ho! He! He!" Skeeter Butts howled. "I done dat trick once myself. You-alls gwine try it agin?"

"Naw, suh."

"I reckon not," Skeeter laughed. "I tried smokin' dat stuff twenty year ago an' right now whenever I sees a bush of dat rabbit terbacker, I grabs a tree an' begins to heave!"

Skeeter turned his machine and started back to Tickfall.

"Whar you want me to take you?" he asked.

"Home, quick!" Org sighed.

"Drap me at de Hen-Scratch," Little Bit begged. "I ain't got de cornstitution to ride no furder."

Skeeter drove to Gaitskill's home, lifted Org out of the machine and carried him to the porch. Org

promptly stretched out flat on his back on the porch floor and called:

"Gince! Oh, Gince! Come here and help me! I'm dying!"

Coming in answer to his call, Miss Virginia's face at first assumed an expression of fright at the sight of Org, then, glancing at Skeeter's grinning mug, her uneasiness vanished.

"What have you been doing?" she asked Org.

"Smoking," Org confessed. "Smoking a pipe!"

"Where is that pipe?"

Org thrust a trembling hand into the pocket of his coat and produced the briar-root.

"The idea!" Miss Virginia snapped, looking at the pipe with loathsome repugnance. "What else have you in your pockets? Let me see!"

Org turned the pockets of his trousers wrong side out and a number of strange and nameless things rolled out, things which could have value only in the eyes of a boy.

"Turn out your coat pockets!" Virginia commanded.

Org thrust his hand into his coat and handed Virginia a green-plush box.

The eyes of Skeeter Butts nearly popped out of his head.

"For goodness' sake!" Virginia exclaimed in an angry voice as she seized the box.

"I was carrying it for luck, Gince," Org said

apologetically. "Little Bit said it was lucky, but —oh, I feel so sick!"

Virginia opened the box and brought forth a rabbit-foot surmounted on one end with silver. Finding that it had not been injured, she spoke in a mollified tone:

"After this, you understand that this plush box is mine, young man! Don't you ever touch it again!"

"I won't. It ain't no good."

"Skeeter," she said. "Carry Org upstairs to my room. I'll lead the way."

Skeeter lifted the prostrate boy and carried him where his sister led. He lingered around the bed where he had placed Org until he saw Miss Virginia open the drawer of a dressing-table and place the green-plush box within it and shut the drawer.

"You wants me to git de dorctor, Miss Virginny?" Skeeter asked.

"No. That will be all for you, thank you."

When Skeeter stepped out upon the road beside the house, he noticed Colonel Gaitskill out in the horse-pasture, walking around in a circle defined by a clump of grass, his eyes glued upon the ground as if he was hunting for something.

"Have you done loss somepin, Marse Tom?" Skeeter inquired as he walked to where he was.

"Yes. I had a pipe that I have smoked for twenty years. I threw it out in these weeds this morning and bought a new pipe. But the new

pipe is an abomination. I'm looking for the old one."

"I think young Marse Org is got dat ole one," Skeeter laughed. "Miss Virginny jes' now tuck it offen him an' lef' it on de front porch."

Gaitskill stooped and broke off the stem of a weed. He stripped the leaves from the straight stem, crushed them, and sniffed at the peculiar, sweetish, tobacco odor.

Skeeter caught the scent, reeled backward, clutched at his throat, grabbed a convenient tree and began to heave!

XI

AT AUCTION

When Skeeter Butts informed Mustard Prophet that his coveted rabbit-foot was in the Gaitskill home, Mustard nearly went into hysterics.

"My Gawd!" he wailed. "No tellin' whut dem white chillun will do to dat foot—an' mebbe I won't never see it agin."

"Dey ain't gwine hurt it—Marse Tom's house is safer dan a bank!" Skeeter protested.

"How'll I ever git dat foot back outen dat house?" Mustard howled. "Of co'se de house is safer dan a bank. Us cain't rob a white folk's house."

"How come you want it back ef it b'longs to Marse Tom?" Skeeter asked.

"It's dis way, Skeeter," Mustard said, trying to explain. "Eve'ything dat Marse Tom trusts to me, I keeps jes' like it is when he gibs it to me. Ef he hands me a door-key, he needn't ax me fer dat key fer ten year, but when he do, I'll gib him dat key! Now, he gimme dat foot fifteen year ago, an' he ain't never mentioned dat foot since dat time nor seed it endurin' all dem years; but ef he wuster come to de Nigger-Heel to-morrer an' ax me, 'Mustard, whar's my rabbit-foot?' my insides would bust open an' be outsides onless I could say: 'Here she am!'"

"I sees," Skeeter Butts said. "You's got a rep wid Marse Tom."

"Dat's right. I's tryin' not to ruin my rep."

"I wish I'd 'a' knowed dat little white boy had dat foot in his pocket," Skeeter sighed. "I'd 'a' picked his pocket or heldt him up or somepin' like dat."

"Too late fer dat now," Mustard mourned. "Dat white boy found dat rabbit-foot down at ole Popsy's cabin. Popsy lives back on de Gaitskill place in a cabin Marse Tom gib him, an' dem pickaninnies wus playin' aroun' dar an' swiped it. An' ef Marse Tom ever ketches on dat I wus so keerless wid his royal foot dat I let a bat like ole Popsy git holt of it an' run away wid it, an' den let it git in de hands of dem chillun—Oh, Lawdy!"

Tears ran down the cheeks of Mustard Prophet. The loss of the luck-charm was a real tragedy to

Mustard, for his life had been one of absolute fidelity in little things.

Every Southern man knows that the most unaccountable paradox in negro nature and character lies right here: you may choose the trickiest negro thief in Louisiana, give him the key to your money-chest, go to Europe and stay ten years, and when you return the negro will hand you the key, and the contents of the chest will be intact. Doubtless, he will open the chest a hundred times and investigate everything within it, but he will not betray his trust. Then, having surrendered the key and given an account of his stewardship, as he goes through the hall on the way out, he might pick up your gold-headed cane, stick it down his pants' leg and hike!

But Mustard had always kept his record straight in all respects. He was faithful in that which was much and in that which was least. And now that his rabbit-foot had got in Gaitskill's home, he found it impossible to stay away from that house. He must get it back before Gaitskill discovered it there and asked questions. He dared not tell Hopey where it had been located, for Hopey had an openwork mind and a garrulous mouth, and she might let something drop that would reveal the secret.

Mustard devoted his days to service on the Nigger-Heel plantation and came to town every night. He had to ride fourteen miles to make the

round trip every twenty-four hours, but he felt easier if he could only be near the house where his rabbit-foot was concealed.

It was summer time, growing time, with the cotton "laid by." Not much work to be done on the plantation and a great many days as well as nights could be spent in town. His presence around the Gaitskill house attracted no comment, for Mustard and his fat spouse had been associated with the Gaitskill family since the day they were born. They were as much of the place as the trees that grew on the lawn and their presence was no more unusual.

Mustard, in the rôle of Hopey's helper, contrived to run a great many errands up and down the back stairs of the Gaitskill house, trying with each trip to get closer to his luck-charm, at least close enough to see it and to know that it was still there and safe. But he could never muster quite enough courage to enter Miss Virginia Gaitskill's private room.

Saturday afternoon came, the afternoon when every negro in Louisiana who can acquire a little money to spend when he gets to town, puts on his best clothes and leaves the plantation.

Each village fills up with colored folks. Each darkey has his own idea of what constitutes fine dress and on this parade he sees no reason for wearing something showy without being able to show it. If he wears a red undershirt he keeps his overshirt

unbuttoned so the showy thing will show. If he wears a pair of red socks, he keeps his trousers rolled up nearly to his knees, and sometimes one can see a hundred negroes who look like they are fixed for wading. If he possesses a colored handkerchief, be sure to look for it in the upper pocket of his coat, one corner sticking out!

If he has anything to sell, he brings it to town. Stock is auctioned upon the street, horses are swapped, lies are exchanged, knives, pistols, "gamblin'-hands," conjures, and luck-charms, all exchange owners.

Mustard mingled with this crowd in gloomy pre-occupation. His mind and his heart were centered upon a green-plush box in the top dresser-draw of a young lady's boudoir—as inaccessible, so it seemed to him, as the moon!

A number of men converged, forming a laughing crowd in front of the court-house, and listened to the raucous voice of an auctioneer:

"Old Jinx" was for sale by auction.

"Gentlemen, this here is a mule that is known to everybody in this parish. He's got the legs on him and he's got the bones on him, and he's got a good, sound mind in a good, sound body, both ripened by long years of toil and experience. Some of you remember when Jinx first came to Tickfall Parish, but none of you can remember how old Jinx is now and how old he was when you first saw him. You can estimate the age of a cow by the rings on

her horns and the age of a tree by the concentric rings on its trunk, and the age of a horse or mule by the teeth. But Jinx is an exception to all rules. He's a mystery. He has no pride of ancestry, no hope of posterity, and his future is behind him. How much am I bid for Jinx?"

There were guffaws of laughter and sly jokes passed among the men, but there were no bidders.

"Don't be afraid of Jinx, gentlemen!" the auctioneer pleaded. "He's done a lot of work in his time and he's got a lot more work in his system if anybody can get it out. He's perfectly harmless, a woman or a child can drive him or ride him or work him in the field. He's as deaf as a post, so you can cuss him in any known language without causing offense to the cussee. He's nearly a hundred years old, I reckon, but his age ain't nothing against him. I knew a man who was one hundred years old and he married a woman who was ninety years old and they had a little baby that was born with a pair of spectacles on his nose and a full set of teeth. How much am I bid for Jinx?"

"Five dollars!" some wag shouted.

"Five! Five! Five! I'm bid five!" the auctioneer began with a monotonous, bark-like chant. "Five dollars, I'm bid, only five! Somebody make it six, make it six, make it six! Six dollars—somebody bid six, as a token of love and esteem for old Jinx—the only mule which has survived the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, the

recent Mexican War, and the mule behind that dragged the guns in the great world war.

"Veteran and survivor of four great wars, and yet this mule never smelt powder or heard a cap pop! This mule with all his rich and varied experiences, is like a feller who spends a dollar riding on a merry-go-round. He spends all his money, gets off at the same place he got on, and where's he been at? Nothing but a round trip for Jinx! To my positive knowledge, I've auctioned him off in front of this court-house twenty-two times in the past twenty-two years! Am I bid six?"

"Six!"

Then began the monotonous pleading and chanting of the auctioneer, his singsong appeal for seven dollars, interspersed with feeble jokes about Jinx.

As he stood leaning against a tree in listless inattention, Mustard Prophet saw Miss Virginia Gaitskill pass in an automobile with Captain Kerley Kerlerac. Ten minutes later he saw Mrs. Gaitskill enter the Tickfall bank, of which Colonel Gaitskill was president. Casting his eyes about him, he beheld Orren Randolph Gaitskill playing with Little Bit on a plot of grass beside the court-house. Then Mustard woke up!

"Dis here is my Gawd-given chance to git my rabbit-foot," was the idea which exploded in his brain, and he started for the Gaitskill home with all the speed in his body.

XII

THE HIGHEST BIDDER

Attracted by the crowd, Org and Little Bit became interested witnesses curious to know who would finally acquire old Jinx. This was the first auction Org had ever seen, and without an idea of the financial obligations involved in the transaction, he began to help the matter along.

When it seemed that Jinx was going to be knocked down to somebody, Org, at the solicitation of the auctioneer, bid eight!

"Eight dollars, eight, eight, eight!" the auctioneer whooped, seizing the bid like a woodpecker swoops upon a ripe June-bug. "Who'll make it nine?"

It was a hot day. The perspiration streamed down the face of the auctioneer and the old mule stood with bowed head, panting for breath, utterly oblivious to the crowd around him. The auctioneer draped one arm over Jinx's protruding hip-bone, hanging there for support, while he chanted:

"Nine, nine, nine—somebody make it nine!"

"Why don't you do what that gentleman asks you?" Org inquired of Little Bit. "He asks you to make it nine—why don't you do it?"

"Nine dollars!" Little Bit exclaimed in a frightened tone.

"Ten!" Orren Randolph Gaitskill called.

"Ten, I'm bid; ten, I'm bid—somebody's either drunk or crazy, by jacks! Ten, I'm bid—who'll play dampfool and make it 'leven?"

"'Leben!" Little Bit chimed.

The auctioneer jerked off his big wool hat, slapped it against the bony side of the mule till it popped like a pistol and howled:

"Wake up, Jinx! You old varmint—you are surrounded by friends! Wake up and show your manners!"

The mule raised his head, shut one eye with an absurdly sleepy wink, dropped one big leathery ear forward, and let his head sag down until his nose almost touched his knee.

"Twelve dollars!"

This was more than the auctioneer could endure. He must ascertain the source of these rival bids. A shout of laughter rose from the crowd of men which shook the windows in the stores, as the auctioneer stooped and looked between the men and his red-rimmed eyes rested upon two boys, one white, one black!

"Who bid that twelve dollars?" he snapped, glaring at the boys.

"Me," Org confessed.

"You want to buy this old mule?"

"Er—yes, sir."

"Have you got twelve dollars to pay for it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where's that money—show it to me!"

"It's up in Gince's room," Org said without explaining who Gince was. "I'll have to go after it."

"Go! Hurry!" the auctioneer snapped, wiping the perspiration from his face. "What sort of business man are you, leaving your pocketbook lying around? Here, you, Little Bit! Hold old Jinx till this boy comes back!"

Mustard lost no time in getting to Gaitskill's home, but the resolution which had given speed to his feet oozed away when he arrived, and left him a timorous negro, hesitant, ignorant of how to proceed further to secure the object he had come after. Mustard had no practical experience in this sort of work to guide him now. He realized dimly that it was not becoming that the trusted overseer of a great plantation should sneak into his employer's home and take something from it, even though the thing he took really belonged to him. But he knew that this was the only way he could get the luck-charm without letting Marse Tom know.

He reconnoitered and assured himself that no one was in the house. He walked through the kitchen, entered the back hall, and climbed cautiously up the back steps. Walking quietly, he went through the upper hall toward the front and stood at last looking into the dainty, exquisite room of the girl in the home.

It took him a long time to muster the courage to

go in. It was a pretty room, with ferns and photographs and flowered cretonne, an old rosewood bed of exquisite beauty of design, beside it a small electric lamp with a rose-colored shade. Two windows, shaded by loosely hanging rose-colored silk, a rosewood writing-desk. Mustard saw all this unconsciously. His eyes were set upon the rosewood dressing-table against the wall between the two windows. On the table lay a gold mesh purse; beside the purse were three rings, whose gems could have bought Mustard a barrel full of rabbit-feet!

Of all the treasures in that room, Mustard wanted the least valuable, measured by pecuniary standards. If he had been dying of starvation, he would not have stepped within that room to lay a thievish hand upon a single object. But he had to have that rabbit-foot!

One step at a time, moving with fear and trembling, he started toward the dressing-table. Frightened, he backed out into the hall again; venturing once more, he got almost to the table, then backed again. He stepped to the far end of the hall and looked anxiously down the back steps, fearful that someone might have entered the kitchen. Then he returned to the room, ventured, backed out, moved forward, moved sidewise, hesitated, side-stepped, moved forward slowly and at last laid his black, square-shaped, labor-hardened hand upon the beautiful white scarf upon the dresser!

One of Orren Randolph Gaitskill's favorite games was to play "Indian." This consisted in sneaking about the house in absolute silence, dodging behind the doors, crawling under the beds and couches and tables if he heard anyone approaching and when a suitable opportunity presented itself, he would jump out upon some member of the household with a blood-curdling yell!

Org was playing Indian now for a purpose. He was by no means sure that his sister would approve his purchasing a mule for twelve dollars even with his own money, and he planned to slip up to her room and get his money out of his own purse in her dressing-table drawer without her knowledge.

He noiselessly opened the front door and entered the reception-room. As he sneaked up the steps, his eyes came level with the floor of the hallway above, he saw Mustard Prophet, backing and filling, giving a ridiculous illustration of a steamboat trying to make a difficult landing.

Great is the imagination of boyhood!

Org caught this thing in an instant: Here he was, a wild and savage Indian slipping up upon a steamboat of pioneers while the boat was trying to land upon the banks of the mighty Mississippi. Mustard Prophet, backing and filling, moving up and moving back, was the steamboat!

Mustard's negro wife went into Miss Virginia's room every day to straighten up. Mustard helped Hokey around the house all the time. The fact

that Mustard was in the house, or even in his sister's room, made no difference to the boy. That part of it was all right.

Orren was determined that Mustard should not see him. He lay down flat upon the stair-steps and crawled with the greatest caution toward the top.

Just as the steamboat navigated the dangerous waters of Miss Gaitskill's room and threw out a line on the dressing-table, the Indian peeped around the door-jamb!

It is better to bandon the rhetorical and imaginative now; it is too easy to forget which is who, and get the Indian and the steamboat mixed.

What Org saw as he peeped around the door was Mustard Prophet, his nervous black hand resting upon the dressing-table. Slowly Org raised himself to his feet and took a big breath and jumped.

There was a loud whoop, which Org imagined was the equivalent to a blood-curdling yell!

It curdled Mustard Prophet, all right!

The negro was absolutely petrified! He stood like a statue carved of ebony, apparently nothing alive about him except the eyes, which got bigger and burned with fires of terror. Fright sometimes paralyzes temporarily; nothing moves, even the mind stands still. The victim helpless, disaster swoops down like an eagle upon its prey.

Orren was disappointed.

"Why didn't you jump when I hollered?" he

exclaimed in an aggrieved tone. "I'm playing Indian."

Orren was completely blind to the negro's pitiful fright. It was fully a minute before Mustard could utter a word. The vital forces had ceased, and they started slowly as when a street-car grips the vital force of the cable and gets going.

"Dat yell wus so disturbin' dat I felt—er—sorter disturbed, Marse Org," he sighed weakly, walking toward the hall and resting his hand upon the door-jamb. "I wus plum' putrified wid bein' so skeart!"

"You don't act like it," Org snorted. "The next time I yell like that, you jump!"

"I will, Marse Org, I shore will!" Mustard promised him fervently. "I got to hurry down to de kitchen now. Goo-good-by!"

Org jerked open the drawer of the dressing-table, flirted a green-plush box which contained a rabbit-foot out of his way, picked up his own little purse and extracted twelve dollars.

Slamming the drawer shut, he went racing back to the court-house to pay for his mule.

XIII

THE HIRELINGS

When Org stopped in front of the court-house and placed the twelve dollars in the auctioneer's

sweating, dirt-begrimed palm, that functionary bellowed:

"Twelve, I'm bid, once! Twelve, I'm bid, twice! Twelve, I'm bid, three times, and sold! Sold to this boy for twelve dollars! Go git your mule, son!"

The auctioneer sought a convenient place to quench a consuming thirst. Old Jinx stood in the middle of the street, his eyes closed, his big, loose ears hanging down like a couple of banana-leaves that had broken and were flapping down around the stalk of the plant. Org caught hold of one big ear and spoke down into its fuzzy, dusty depth, exactly as a man speaks into the mouth-piece of a telephone:

"Hello, hello! Wake up!"

Little Bit placed the end of a small leading-rope into Org's hands and announced:

"You done bought a mule, Marse Org. Whut you gwine do wid him?"

"What?" Org asked.

"You cain't leave dis here mule standin' still an' blockin' up de street," Little Bit explained. "Dey'll arrest dis mule an' put him in de holdover like dey does all de stray cows, an' it'll cost you five dollars to git him out."

"I haven't got any five dollars," Org announced. "That man took all the money I had."

"I reckon we better lead him somewheres," Little Bit laughed.

"Help me up on him," Org commanded. "I want to ride him now."

"You ain't got no bridle," Little Bit demurred. "Dat mule ain't know whar you want him to go 'thout no bridle onless you kin gee-haw him, an' you ain't know nothin' about ploughin'. An' he'll shore take you back whar he came from ef you ain't guide him somewhar else."

"I guess we better go ahead of him and show him the way," Org proposed. Then gazing at the closed eyes, he said: "I guess we better take him home and let him take a nap; he looks awful sleepy to me."

"He's like a nigger," Little Bit snickered. "A mule an' a nigger kin sleep standin' up an' walkin'!"

At the foot of the hill near the Gaitskill home, Jinx uttered a loud groan and sank down upon his side, slapping the earth with a jolt that shook the ground under their feet.

"Dar now, he shore come down wid a looseness like he's fixin' to die," Little Bit exclaimed. "Ef he dies here in dis town, it'll cost you fo' dollars to hab him hauled away."

"I haven't got four dollars," Org replied, and then ran down the street, waving his arms at an automobile.

The machine stopped and Dr. Moseley leaned out and listened:

"Doctor, I know you ain't a mule physician,

but I just bought a big mule and he's took sick and if he dies it'll cost a lot of money to have him hauled off. I ain't got the money to have him hauled away, and so you must come and keep him from dying."

"Got any money to pay my doctor's bill?" the physician asked.

"No, sir."

"Got any money to pay for medicine to cure your mule?"

"No, sir."

"Charity patient, by jacks!" the physician grinned.

"No, sir," Org protested. "Me and my mule will pay. Whenever your automobile breaks down, I'll let you ride my mule!"

No offer could be fairer, so Org swung up on the foot-board and rode with the obliging physician to the sick-bed of the mule. That able physician had once been all-boy himself, and he understood.

"Bless my soul, if it ain't Jinx!" he laughed as he drew near the prostrate animal. After a moment's examination he added: "That mule is hungry, boys. Feed him! Feed him quick! Feed him high! Repeat the dose three times a day before each meal!"

Laughing, he turned his automobile and went off.

Two hours passed while the boys were getting feed and watching Jinx eat. They did not mind

waiting. They sat on the curb in great contentment, discussing their purchase and planning for the future. Several men and women passed and stopped to chat with the boys, attracted by the novelty of a mule lying on the side of a road attended by two small boys. Without exception they recognized Jinx, for that mule was an established institution in Tickfall.

When Jinx got up the hill to the Gaitskill home he appeared very familiar with the place. In fact, he had been one of the Gaitskill mules several times in his varied career, and had found few other places where he had been as well treated.

"I guess we better let him stay in the front yard to-night, Little Bit," Org said as he opened the gate and turned the animal in upon the Gaitskill lawn. "He's too feeble to walk back as far as the stable, and I haven't got any more time to fool with this mule. All our family are going to eat at Captain Kerley Kerlerac's home to-night."

The boys walked back together, separating at the court-house, and Little Bit went to the Hen-Scratch saloon.

He found Skeeter Butts in charge—told the story of Jinx, incidentally remarking that the whole Gaitskill family had gone to Kerlerac's to eat dinner with his "boss."

This last information pleased Skeeter Butts very much. He went out in the rear of the saloon to be by himself and think it over.

"Dat rabbit-foot is as good as got back already. I knows all about Marse Tom's house. I done wucked in dat house so much dat I could walk eve'ywhar in it wid my eyes shut."

About that time Hopey Prophet informed Dazzle Zenor of the absence of the Gaitskill family that evening. She knew the house, knew the people, and while she had not quite the liberty of an old family retainer, she fixed her plans to take this opportunity to raid the house.

"I'll git dat foot certain," she answered.

Skeeter waited impatiently until nine o'clock, then lighted a cigarette and sauntered out of the saloon. Under ordinary circumstances he would have entered the Gaitskill house from the rear. But, knowing that no one was at home, he came to the front porch and entered the front door. Once inside the house, he became extremely cautious. No use making a noise, even if there was no one to hear except himself.

It was very dark in the reception-room, and while Skeeter was familiar with the house, and was sure that he was alone in it, he did not care to disarrange any furniture, and still less did he wish to fall over something and break it. He crept silently up the stairs and paused within a few feet of the room he intended to enter.

He heard a sound. Listening for a moment, he decided that someone was moving in the house, and that he had better not try to secure the rabbit-

foot that night. His close-clipped hair stood up on his head like pig bristles as he began to retreat, and he lost no time in beating his way back to the hall below. He started to open the front door and escape that way, but on the second thought he decided it would be safer to go out through the kitchen.

As he passed into the back hall he heard some one coming down the steps of the back stairs. He crouched in a corner, waiting for the person to descend. Whoever it was, passed within a few feet of him, crossed the kitchen, and went out of the door. Skeeter noiselessly followed.

Once safely outside the house a senseless panic struck him, and he shot around the corner toward the front at full speed. On the walk in front of the house he collided with a terrible force with something, the impact jarring every bone in his body, and for a moment knocking him breathless, senseless. The second party in the collision, with a whistling expiration of breath sank limply against Skeeter Butts. He thrust out his arms and embraced a woman!

Skeeter was fond of the lady folks, and was usually chivalrous. But on this occasion he "dropped" the lady right there; cut her dead, so to speak. And started across the lawn at a speed never before attained by his pedal extremities.

Skeeter traveled crawfish fashion; he went forward, but he looked back. He turned to see where he was going, and there suddenly loomed before

him a big, black object which looked to him as large as a house.

It was Jinx, lying on the ground.

Skeeter hit the front end of Jinx first and fell sprawlingly forward, and his arms and legs, outspread, were spraddled across Jinx's bony back. The startled mule, aroused from his slumber, belowed like a cow and began to get up, rising in bony sections, like a folding ladder.

For a moment Skeeter hung on to a few protruding bones, then he emitted a little whimpering sigh, slid off the bony sides of the 'ever-rising mountain, and lay flat upon the ground. The second collision had knocked him out.

Skeeter did not lose consciousness. He just lost breath. It was a long time before he rallied sufficiently to sit up, and when he did he heard a woman weeping softly.

"Who is dat onwindin' dat bawl?" Skeeter inquired softly.

"Dis here is me," the woman answered, which was enough for Skeeter, for he knew that voice.

"Whut wus you doin' in dat house, Dazzle?" Skeeter asked, when he found her in the dark, sitting on the bottom step of the porch.

"I wus tryin' to git dat rabbit-foot," she said simply.

"How come you know about dat foot?"

"Hokey tole me. I wants de money Mustard is put up to git it back."

"I wants dem dollars, too," Skeeter laughed. "Less go in togedder an' 'vide up de money even-Stephen."

"I takes you on," Dazzle said, finding comfort in her grief.

"Not no more to-night," Skeeter said. "Dar's a mule runnin' loose in dis yard as big as a battle-ship. I butted him like a torpedo."

"Whut happened?" Dazzle asked.

"I wus Jinxed," Skeeter said simply. "Less go home."

XIV

THE ALLIGATOR

Jinx became the greatest plaything that Org and Little Bit possessed. He could not fatten, but under the care and treatment he received he acquired a little more interest in life, and showed quite a fondness for his youthful owner.

Gaitskill laughed, and decided that the mule would keep Org out of mischief, which would justify the cost of its keep. Tickfall smiled at the sight of a little boy sitting on a big saddle while a diminutive black boy sat behind him, proud of his position and waving a greeting to all his black friends as he passed. Org and Little Bit would not have swapped Jinx for an automobile.

"A automobile gits out of fix," Little Bit said as they discussed this one day. "When she stops

nothin' kin make her go. Ef somepin gits de matter wid it, nobody knows whut ails her."

"But this mule is different," Org said proudly. "I like something that wags its tail."

"Dis hay-burner suits me," Little Bit agreed.

They found to their delight that Jinx was thoroughly familiar with that great jungle called the Little Moccasin Swamp. The boys could ride out to that swamp upon Jinx and turn into any path which led into the jungle. The mule would carry them for miles along the winding animal trails, and then to their surprise they would find themselves in the highway again. They explored recesses in that swamp which they could never have reached without the mule, and they were never uneasy about losing their way.

They found great pools of water where large fish swam that were easily visible to the eye, and apparently unafraid. They found great sinks of vegetation where ugly snakes crawled, and they learned that Jinx could smell a snake as far as the eye could see, and that he had no desire to get near enough to be bitten. They saw immense turtles sunning themselves upon the logs and stumps. They found droves of wild pigs, extremely dangerous to man when he was standing upon his two feet, but harmless when a four-footed animal carried them upon his back.

Hence arose this matter of debate between them: Can a wild hog count? If he cannot, how

does he know the difference between two legs and four legs?

They found an eagle's nest, came too near, and were followed for miles by a screaming bird which swooped down upon them, fanned her immense wings within an inch of their hats, and snapped her vicious beak in their faces with a noise like the snip of immense shears. Once they saw a panther crouched upon a live-oak limb, his eyes glowing in the jungle shadows like living rubies; the animal screamed at them—the only thing which ever extracted a burst of speed from Jinx. They were followed for miles as they went out of that swamp by that screaming, snarling, hissing, spitting cat.

Once Little Bit turned around and made a noise like an exploding pop-bottle, a method which he had found efficacious in frightening domestic cats away. The vocal answer to Little Bit's elocutionary effort was so terrifying that Jinx nearly jumped out of his skin.

Then one day, on the edge of a little clearing, they found a six-foot alligator asleep in the sun.

They dismounted and walked closer. The alligator slept on.

"How close can we get to this thing before he wakes up, Little Bit?" Org asked.

"He's awake right now," Little Bit told him. "He pretends like he's so sleepy he's mighty nigh dead, but he knows we is here all right. But he

won't move till you gits right on him, close enough to tech him wid yo' hand."

"What'll he do then?" Org wanted to know.

"He'll slap his tail aroun' and knock yo' foots out from under you an' bite yo' leg plum' off," Little Bit informed him. "He's layin' dar now waitin' fer a wild pig to come rootin' aroun' him like wild pigs does aroun' logs. Den he'll slap 'em wid his tail an' bite 'em in two."

The boys backed away, climbed upon the trunk of a fallen tree, and looked across the underbrush at the alligator. He was as still as an old rusty stove-pipe, which he somewhat resembled.

"Less take that rope off our saddle and rope him," Org suggested. "They rope everything in California, cattle and everything."

"Who's gwine put dat rope aroun' dat alligator?" Little Bit asked.

"You can do that," Org replied as he untied the rope from the saddle.

"Mebbe I kin, but I ain't gwine to," Little Bit asserted, climbing up on the back of the mule. "Little Bit don't choose but a little bit of alligator in his'n. Dis mule don't hanker fer none."

"All right, 'fraid cat," Org taunted. "You hold the mule, and I'll throw the rope."

Like most boys who had lived in the West, Org had often played with a rope, looping it and throwing it in imitation of the cowmen. He climbed upon a trunk of a fallen tree about thirty feet from

the quiescent alligator, coiled the rope, and threw it with wonderful luck. The coil straightened, and the open loop fell right in front of the alligator.

In the less remote sections the alligator is fearful, for it has learned the menace of man. But this one had possibly never seen a human being before. When the rope fell it moved forward a few feet and became quiet again. Org gave the rope a quick jerk, and the loop caught under one of the alligator's front feet and over his head. Org was standing by a limb upon the fallen tree, bracing himself to keep his balance. Quickly he twisted his end of the rope around the limb and tied it.

The creature was still unaware that it was captive. Org threw a few branches from the tree in its direction, and it crawled slowly forward a few feet. At last it came to the end of the rope.

A hoarse, coughlike bark rang through the forest, and instantly that six-foot alligator was a snarling fury as it entered into combat with its bonds. For ten minutes the two frightened boys beheld the most terrifying spectacle they had ever imagined. Org scuttled down from the tree-trunk and took refuge with Little Bit upon the back of the mule, making ready for instant flight.

Within a radius of that rope the alligator beat down the marsh-grass as flat as if a road-rolling machine had passed over it. He got into the low underbrush and pounded it down, making a noise

like an express-train with his powerful clawing feet and his slapping tail. He roared and raised himself almost upright on his tail, and clawed at the rope with his front feet as a man would fight with his hands, and snapped his great jaws together like the slapping of two clapboards.

But he could never succeed in getting the rope between his teeth, for the reason that he could not turn his head or lower his chin. Finally, in an awful burst of fury, he threw himself backward, rolled over and over, slapping, thrashing, clawing, snarling, uttering awful coughlike barks to which a thousand echoes in the forest responded in kind. The boys wondered at the creature's catlike agility, shuddered at the concentrated venomous fury of the battle, quivered with awe at the agonizing, snarling vociferation emitted from between those terrible, gnashing, snapping teeth.

Yet the very configuration of the woods fought for the boys. The rope was constantly taut, for the reason that it could hardly be moved without becoming entangled with roots and cypress knees and the tough underbrush and the clinging, almost unbreakable vines called bamboo. The struggle against these obstacles slowly exhausted the alligator's strength.

At last he sank down and remained quiet.

After a while the boys mustered their courage and crept forward to see. They found their captive had twisted the rope around the cypress knees

and projecting roots until he was tied to the ground and helpless. His eyes were not sleepy now. They glowed with baleful flames, ugly, piglike, with glints of green in their fires of fury. The big mouth gapped wide when he saw the boys, and the jaws snapped with frightful force.

After a consultation, the two boys ran across the clearing to a switch-cane jungle and cut two long cane poles. Returning with these, they began to prod and torment the alligator, thrusting the poles into his mouth when he opened it; and when he no longer would let them look at his tongue, they still pursued their medical examination by punching him in every place where they thought he might have a particularly tender spot.

This roused him to another performance, a fury of struggle in which he fought and roared and barked and clawed at the rope, and thrashed with his tail, and chased the two boys up a tree until his activities abated.

All day long they tormented the alligator, exhausting every resource in their efforts to get him, as they expressed it, "to cut up some more." But after five or six hours there was no more fight in him.

When the alligator showed plainly that he had made positively his last appearance as an entertainer, the boys decided it was time to start for home.

"How we gwine git our rope back?" Little Bit asked.

"Let that old sucker keep his old rope. I don't want it," Org said, wiping the sweat from his face on the sleeve of his shirt and sitting down in utter weariness.

"Marse Tom will bust us ef we leaves dat rope out in dese here woods," Little Bit warned him. "Ropes comes high in de store ef you got to pay fer 'em."

"I'll tell Uncle Tom where it is, and let him come after it when he wants it," Org replied.

"You better not let dat white man know we been out here monkeyin' wid a alligator," Little Bit said. "He'll sell our mule an' put me in jail an' flay de hide offen you."

"That's so," Org agreed. "Well, the old alligator is nearly dead. Let's tie our end of the rope to the saddle and make old Jinx drag the alligator up to the house. Then when he dies we can get the rope off him."

Little Bit agreed to this, and it was not hard to do. They had whipped the alligator until there was no more fight in him, and wearied him until there was not more strength to fight. Their hardest work was untwisting the rope, for as they got nearer to the alligator they had to pry the rope from around the roots and snags with a pole. They never got the courage to get close to those jaws which had snapped at them so terribly.

Jinx did not object to a little light hauling when a white boy walked on one side and a black boy on

the other, acting as escort of honor. The alligator was easily dragged over the marsh-grass and along the animal trails toward the town. Although dragged for over three miles, he at no time showed resistance or attempted to "cut up."

In the rear of the Gaitskill stables there was a large pig-pen, to which admittance was gained by a gate. Org led the mule in such a way that the alligator faced the gate. Then he led the mule around to the other side of the pen, led him forward, and thus dragged the alligator through the open gate.

Then the boys took a rake, hung one of the teeth through the loop in the rope, and by considerable juggling they managed to make the loop loose and large.

"Now, if he kicks around any before he dies, he'll walk out of that rope," Org announced. "Then we won't have to say anything about it."

"Dat big old animile ain't gwine die," Little Bit chuckled. "Us ain't hurt him none, an' by dis time to-morrer he'll be ready to fix fer anodder fight."

"I'm through fighting alligators," Org said wearily. "I never was as hungry and tired in my life. But we'll keep this old sucker in his pen and make him our pet alligator."

XV

BLASTING POWDER

Org and Little Bit loved to play in an old storehouse situated in the corner of the yard in the rear of Gaitskill's home. There was a reason. Both loved sweets, and in that house was where Colonel Gaitskill stored his famous ribbon-cane sirup.

This sweet, so famous in the State, is not marketable. When once it is put in a barrel or other container, it cannot be moved or it will turn to sugar. Even with the greatest care, it is pretty sure to turn sugary before it is all used up. The sugar forms first a hard crust around the inside of the barrel and around the spigot from which it is drawn. Sometimes you can turn that spigot on full and the stream will be a tiny thread of liquid sweetness which flows with exasperating slowness. A moment later the sugary obstruction may break from around the spigot, and after that, the flood!

Doubtless Shakespeare had such a catastrophe in mind when he wrote of

The taste of sweetness, whereof a little
More than a little is by much too much.

Half a dozen times a day Org and Little Bit slipped into this storeroom, turned on the spigot of the sirup barrel, caught the tiny stream of sweetness in the palms of their hands, and lapped it out with their tongues.

They were at that enjoyable diversion now.

Suddenly there was a loud whoop of fright from the direction of the orchard where Mustard Prophet had gone to gather some figs for lunch. The boys ran to the door and looked out. They saw Mustard climb down from a rickety step-ladder, fold that ladder together and hurl it in the direction of some object. Then he came out of that orchard, stepping high like a turkey wading through mud, looking constantly behind him, and making as many different noises with his mouth as a whole brass-band.

Hopey, thinking he had been bitten by a snake, met him half-way to the house.

"Whut ails you, Mustard?" she asked.

"My Gawd, Hopey!" he panted. "Dar's a alligator out in dat orchard fawty feet long! I seen it!"

The noise Mustard made had brought all the members of the family out to see what the trouble was. When he told them of seeing the alligator, Org said nothing, and the others of the household were skeptical and laughed at him.

"How do you know you saw an alligator?" Colonel Gaitskill asked.

"I throwed a step-ladder at it, Marse Tom," Mustard wailed. "It wus longer dan de ladder."

"Come back to the orchard and show me," Gaitskill ordered.

"Naw, suh!" Mustard whooped. "Go look fer yo'se'f, boss. Dis nigger is done seen a-plenty!"

"Whut wus he doin' in dat orchard?" Hopey howled.

"He wus aimin' to climb dat step-ladder an' bite my leg off when I seen him," Mustard shuddered. "I gib him de ladder an' tole him he could take my place!"

"Don't make so much noise, Mustard," Gaitskill commanded, as he turned away and entered the house. Nobody credited Mustard's story, except Org and Little Bit, and they slipped away as soon as they could to see if their alligator was still in captivity.

They found that he had escaped, and a broad trail led across the dust of the pig-lot toward the orchard. The alligator had crawled through a hole. The boys promptly decided not to enter the orchard for any purpose whatsoever. Thinking further, they decided they had better absent themselves from home for the day, for that alligator might do all sorts of sensational stunts, and they had seen enough of his performances the day before.

Besides, Colonel Gaitskill might want to know how the creature got on the premises, and Org had found that the best way to avoid answering questions was to be where questions could not be addressed to him.

At that moment there came to the ears of the two boys a dull explosion. They turned their faces in the direction of the sound and left home.

It is a pity that they did not first return to the storehouse and turn off the spigot of the molasses barrel. But they did not. That sirup ran two days and one night!

One of the annoyances of agriculture in Louisiana is stumps. Whenever a farmer undertakes to blast the stumps out of the ground with dynamite or powder, he is sure to have a crowd of small boys to watch him. Org had been on the trail of the dynamiters for a number of days. Whenever they heard an explosion, they knew that some farmer was having a celebration of fireworks and profanity, and they hurried to the spot, guided by the explosive noises.

By being around, they had surreptitiously acquired a number of dynamite caps, also several yards of fuse in various lengths. The sound they had heard a few minutes before was over in the direction of the Cooley bayou, and they went.

What they saw when they got there, put the fear of dynamite in their souls forever.

There was a man who lived on the Cooley bayou who walked on a wooden peg. He had attempted to dynamite a fish-hole. He lighted the fuse of the dynamite stick and walked toward the pool to toss the stick into the water. His wooden peg found a soft place in the earth, and he sank into the mire up to his knees. He pitched forward on his face, the stick of dynamite fell from his hand and rolled just a few feet out of reach. The peg leg

was twisted under the sod and marsh-grass in such a way that the unfortunate man could not tear himself loose and escape from the stick of dynamite.

The explosion tore a hole in the ground in which a large automobile might have been easily concealed, and friends of the cripple found scraps of him hanging in the trees a hundred yards away.

Org and Little Bit arrived just in time to view the effects of the tragedy, and came away with a deep impression of the explosive power of dynamite.

"Dat stuff ain't nothin' fer us to fool wid, Marse Org," Little Bit said earnestly. "'Jes' look whut dat little stick of dynamite done to dat big growed-up man. Ef a wad of dynamite wus to bust close to us, de white folks would hab to put on deir readin' specks to find de pieces, an' dey'd tote us bofe back to Tickfall on a shingle."

"I know where plenty of blasting powder is," Org remarked. "Uncle Tom has a whole keg of powder in his barn."

"Dat's de stuff fer us to monkey wid," Little Bit agreed. "Us don't hab to play wid so much at one time dat we git blowed plum' away."

They found the keg of powder and carried it down to the little branch which ran around the edge of the town. They were very careful as they went around the stable, not to step on the alligator. As they carried their powder away, they looked

back frequently to assure themselves that the alligator was not in pursuit. When at last they had reached the woods, they decided that it would be a good idea to make several loud explosions to scare the alligator and keep him from coming in that direction.

They spent several hours experimenting with the powder, enjoying themselves in a variety of dangerous ways without coming to any harm.

Then Little Bit thought of a hollow log under the wooden bridge that crossed this little branch on the road to the Nigger-Heel plantation. The log was about four feet long, the hollow through the center being about four inches in diameter, and extending nearly the entire length. To the imagination of boys, this thing would be suggestive of a cannon. When Little Bit showed the log to Orren Gaitskill, that was the first thought in his mind.

"Let's put some gunpowder in this log and shoot her off," he proposed. "It's just like a cannon."

"Us ain't got no fuse-hole," Little Bit remarked.

"We can go up to Uncle Tom's and borrow a auger and bore a fuse-hole," Org replied. "I know where an auger is."

They concealed their keg of powder under some brush and spent an hour going after the tool, playing along the road both coming and going. Then they took turns in working, as they bored the hole.

"Less load her up now and shoot off, and that 'll make an end of a perfect day," Org remarked, quoting a part of a song he had heard his sister sing to Captain Kerlerac.

Dis ole cannon is gwine use up all our powder," Little Bit declared, as he peeped up the hollow to where the light of the fuse-hole showed.

"We don't care," Org laughed. "This powder don't cost us nothing."

They placed their fuse properly, then emptied the contents of the keg into the muzzle of the log cannon. They rammed the charge home with a number of old sacks which they had been thoughtful enough to pick up in the barn and bring with them when they went after the augur. Then they added several hat-loads of leaves and grass which they mixed with mud from the branch. After that they charged the "cannon" to the very end with great quantities of sod torn up from the edge of the branch and rammed hard into the muzzle with the blunt end of a big stick.

"Now she's ready to shoot. Who's going to light the fuse?" Org asked.

"Not me," Little Bit said positively. "I'm jes' a little fool nigger, an' ain't to be trusted wid no important jobs."

"I'll light the fuse," Org announced. "Go up on the road and see if anybody is coming."

Little Bit ran up on the little frail wooden bridge which was about twelve feet long, made a

survey, and announced that all was clear. Then he ran far over in the woods.

Org lighted the fuse and followed his black companion at his best speed. When they reached what they thought was a safe distance, they paused and waited.

The idea of the boys was that the powder would simply shoot the mud out of the log, just as a bullet is propelled from the muzzle of a gun. But blasting powder is not a propulsive force; it is something that rends and tears, exerting as much pressure in one direction as in another.

Therefore the boys were very much surprised, when they heard the explosion, to see the frail wooden bridge which spanned the narrow branch rise in the air, break into a number of pieces, and scatter all over the place!

The log cannon went to pieces also.

The boys went somewhere else. They did not run. They could easily have overtaken and passed anybody that was merely running. They just went away from there.

When completely overcome by exhaustion, they dropped down under a tree far away from the scene of their exploit. When, after a long time, they had somewhat recovered their composure and their breath, they began to plan for the future, when, as they thought, they would have to give an account of themselves.

"What does the law do to a feller that busts up a bridge, Little Bit?" Org asked.

"Ef he's a nigger, like me, dey hangs him," Little Bit shuddered.

"But if he's white?" Org inquired.

"Dey shoots him," Little Bit said.

"Then we won't confess," Org announced decisively.

They meditated awhile, and again Org asked a question.

"Did anybody see us with that kag of powder?"

"Nope. Us wus all alone."

"Then we needn't say anything about that kag," Org declared. "Uncle Tom won't miss it for some time."

"Don't we say nothin' about nothin' bustin'?" Little Bit asked.

"No."

"Look at all de scratches dat de briars cut on my face when I wus runnin' away," Little Bit pointed. "How's I gwine esplain dese here scratches? I got to say dat somepin' busted on me, ain't I?"

"No, you fool!" Org exclaimed. "Don't you ever confess that anything busted on you or that you were ever round any busting thing. Tell 'em that you cut your face—er——"

"You had better think up a powerful good lie," Little Bit quavered. "My mammy, she kin ketch on powerful easy to tales."

"Tell her that you cut your face—er—shaving!"

Org replied, uttering the last word with triumphant emphasis.

"Dat shows you don't know nothin' about niggers," Little Bit scoffed. "Most niggers ain't got no hair on deir face an' don't never hab to shave. A nigger whut kin grow a moustacher an' whiskers—he's proud of hisse'f!"

"Aw, shucks," Org said in disgust. "That ruins our perfectly good excuse."

"My face don't look like it's been cut with a razor," Little Bit said obstinately. "It looks like it's been sawed acrost wid a lot of blackberry briars, dat's whut."

"I know it does, but you've got to tell some kind of tale to keep us from being found out," Org said impatiently.

"We don't hab to tell nothin'," Little Bit sighed. "Dat bridge will say a plum' plenty. It'll preach a whole sermont."

"Don't you say nothing about that bridge," Org howled. "Keep your mouth shut."

"S'pose de white folks axes me?"

"Tell 'em you don't know anything."

"I'll tell 'em dat," Little Bit said doubtfully. "But ain't gwine bear down on dat very hard. Ef a nigger tells too many lies, Gawd 'll kill him!"

"If you don't tell a few about that bridge the white folks will kill you before God can get around to you," Org declared.

Then there popped into Orren's head, the final

recourse of all the guilty, the establishment of a false alibi.

"Come on," he howled, springing to his feet. "We'll go back to town and prove to everybody that we have not been in the woods at all to-day. We'll let 'em see us."

XVI

A PAIR OF FEET

Dazzle Zenor went to the Hen-Scratch saloon and sent word to Skeeter that she must see him right away. When he came out to the rear, she lost no time in stating her business.

"Hokey jes' come to my place an' tole me dat dar ain't no Gaitskills at home. Org an' Little Bit is gonod to de woods; Marse Tom is down to de bank, an' ole miss an' Miss Virginny is gone out fer a automobile ride; Mustard Prophet is gone out to de Nigger-Heel plantation, an' is takin' Hokey an' Popsy Spout wid him to give 'em a outin'. Now is yo' time to git de rabbit-foot."

"Yes'm," Skeeter agreed. "Dis time am choosen of de Lawd. Is you willin' to he'p me?"

"Suttinly. I's in on de reeward bill."

"Dis is de plan," Skeeter said. "I walks up to Marse Tom's jes' easylike, kinder moseyin' along, an' I sneaks in de back way an' I sneaks out de back way an' I walks down de back side of de

hill an' makes a roundance to de road at de front of de bottom of de hill."

"Dat's de properest way to do," Dazzle said.

"Yo' plan is dis," Skeeter continued. "You drives my little automobile an' waits fer me at de foot of de hill on de side of de road. You keeps dat engyne runnin' an' you heads dat machine to'rds out of town. We goes straight to de Nigger-Heel an' gits our money."

For half an hour Dazzle amused herself by riding around the town. It was Saturday afternoon, a great crowd of country negroes was in Tickfall, and the girl showed her skill as a driver by seeing how close she could shave to the tail of the farm-wagons and the rear end of the mules and horses and cattle that were on the street.

At one corner there was a drove of mules waiting to be sold at auction; a little farther up the street there was a herd of bony cattle that had been driven down from the hill farms to be sold; at another point there was a flock of sheep lying in the dust, panting with the heat. Around each of these there stood dozens of negroes, inspecting what was for sale whether they intended to buy or not. Dazzle greeted all these friends from the country, but firmly refused all requests for a ride, for she was watching the time, and was determined to be at the meeting-place when Skeeter arrived.

Skeeter sauntered around the streets for a little while, watching the auctioneer in his business and

admiring his line of talk. Then he slipped quietly out of the crowded street and hurried to the home of Colonel Tom Gaitskill.

It was not difficult or dangerous to rob a house with nobody at home. Satisfying himself by an inspection, that he was really alone on the premises, Skeeter entered through the kitchen, went into the little back hall, climbed the back stairs, and entered the room of Miss Virginia Gaitskill. He opened the drawer in her dresser and took out the green-plush box, being careful not to disarrange anything in the drawer. He paused long enough to open the box and assure himself that the rabbit-foot was in it, then he placed the box in the inner pocket of his coat and went out as quietly as he had come.

It had been so easy that he decided to go out the front way and thus avoid the long detour necessary if he went down the hill on the far side and had to walk around to the road. He peeped around the corner of the house in the front, and dodged back in a hurry.

He saw Org and Little Bit climbing over the fence into the horse-lot. They looked tired, as if they had run a long distance, and they looked either excited or scared, as if something unusual had happened; and they were in a hurry, for they climbed the fence rather than take the time to open and shut the gate.

Skeeter's short hair stood upon his cranium like

hog-bristles. Had Orren Randolph Gaitskill found out in some way that he was trying to steal the rabbit-foot? Could Little Bit have been around the saloon and overheard the conversation about the rabbit-foot between himself and Dazzle? Were they coming to the house now to protect this precious green-plush box from theft?

"I reckon I's gwine take de long roundance," Skeeter muttered in a panicky tone as he ran with all his speed toward the rear of the house, keeping the building between himself and the two boys, and when he started down the hill, dodging from bush to bush like a rabbit.

But the boys had something on their minds besides Skeeter Butts. On their long run from the little branch where the bridge had been blown up, Org had thought of something that would attract the attention of the people in Tickfall and register in their minds the fact that he and Little Bit were in town.

Org had ridden with his Uncle Tom in the automobile, and had seen Colonel Gaitskill shut off the power from the engine and coast down the hill from his house to the town. This had given Org an idea on which he had been working for several days. Under a shed in the rear of the Gaitskill stable there was an abandoned, worn-out buggy, without any shafts. Org had tied a rope to each end of the front axle near the front wheels, and had found by experiment that he could guide the buggy

by pulling on the rope, just as if he were driving a horse. Little Bit had pushed the buggy around the smooth, level horse-lot and Org had been able to guide it without difficulty.

So now, confronting this emergency, he decided that the best game he could play would be that of coasting down the Gaitskill hill toward the town in that old buggy. It would be plenty of fun of a kind that would attract attention from those in town.

He instructed Little Bit what to do, and the two boys pushed the buggy out of the horse-lot and stopped it on the brow of the hill. Org climbed into his buggy on the top of the hill just about the time that Skeeter Butts seated himself in his automobile beside Dazzle Zenor at the foot of the hill.

The two started about the same time.

Skeeter planned to go up the street about a block, then turn to his right and go out the principal street to the Nigger-Heel plantation.

Org expected to stop at the foot of the hill, and push his buggy back to the top and coast down again.

One thing that Org had overlooked was that his Uncle Tom's automobile had a brake. The buggy lacked that very important accessory, and when Little Bit pushed it off and climbed on behind, it had not traveled one hundred feet until it was going thirty miles an hour. Half-way down the hill it was "doing fifty," and at the foot of the hill it

was just a rattling horror of incredible speed with momentum enough to carry it half a mile on a level road.

That Providence which looks out for fools, drunken men, and children, gave the buggy just the right turn at the right time to shoot it out toward Main Street. Its momentum carried it across the street like a rocket, sent it plunging madly across the court-house lawn, hurled it into the middle of a lot in the rear of the court-house where the country people hitched their horses and mules, and there it ended its sensational and spectacular flight by colliding with a hitching-rack, spilling out the two boys like peas are tossed from a spoon, and tearing itself to pieces!

The two youngsters sprang up unhurt and made tracks away from there.

One old mule had seen the buggy coming over the court-house lawn with nothing to pull it and nothing to push it. It did not look natural to him; it made the same impression on him that a pair of pants would make on you if you saw the pants coming down the street with nobody in them.

That mule opened his great mouth and uttered a trumpetlike bray just as the vehicle hung up on the hitching-rack. Then mister mule broke his bridle and went galloping up the street, looking back and bawling with every jump.

Every mule in the hitching-lot promptly broke

loose and went galloping after the first mule, also looking back at the strange vehicle which had come among them. All the horses followed, neighing their fright, some pulling buggies and some wagons; some with harness on, some with saddles, and as they all went up the street together, every horse and mule on both sides of the street broke away and joined in the procession.

Many of the animals did not know what it was all about. But it is a fact that if one runaway starts down a street, all the other horses and mules will run with him. They believe in safety first.

Two blocks away there was a herd of cattle standing in the middle of the street being sold at auction. They saw the cyclone coming and fled before it. A block farther up the street a flock of terrified sheep saw the cattle coming, and started out ahead of the cows. A block farther on a drove of hogs saw the sheep coming, and they also believed in safety first, and decided to get there first, so they led the procession.

As the grunting, bleating, bellowing, braying, nickering procession of animals swept forward, all the country dogs which had followed their masters into town from every point of the compass fell in behind and became a mighty chorus of yelping, barking canines, and their number was augmented and their chorus strengthened by all the dogs which Tickfall could contribute. And all the men, women, and children, white and black, and all the

shades of color between, swept out of the stores and offices and shops to see what the disturbance was about, and these fell in behind and added their multitudinous shoutings to the noise and excitement which was like the ululation of wind and wave during a great storm at sea.

In an incredible time the principal street of Tickfall was swept clean of all its live stock and of all its men, but it was littered everywhere with pieces of broken buggies, broken wagons, broken harness, and a dust-cloud was settling upon that vacated street as if Mother Nature was trying to bury what was left out of her sight.

Now for the luck which attends the escapades of youth: every person on the street had looked toward the teams which were running away, and not back at what had originally caused their flight. Those boys had careened over the court-house yard, had come to smash in the middle of the hitching-lot, and had got up and gone away from there without being seen by a single person who identified them as the source of all the trouble. As for Colonel Gaitskill's buggy, he never missed it, and if he had, he could never have identified it among the smashed and broken vehicles that were junked in the hitching-lot after the animals broke loose.

The farmers knew that if one mule runs away every other mule follows; so the poor mule who first saw the buggy and uttered his frightened bawl was blamed for the whole catastrophe!

As for Skeeter Butts and Dazzle Zenor, they were about two blocks from the court-house when they heard that first terrified bray behind them. In a moment the braying and bawling and bleating and squealing and barking and yelling increased greatly.

We have the best authority for the statement that the wicked flee where no man pursueth.

Skeeter and Dazzle decided that all the inhabitants of Tickfall were after them for the theft of the rabbit-foot!

Skeeter took one look behind him at that cloud of dust, caught hold of his spark lever and pulled it down to the last notch, then slowly opened his throttle until it could go no farther. The speed of his flight broke all records in Louisiana for his make of automobile.

His eyes were upon the road just as far ahead of him as he could see, for he knew that going at his present speed it would take a long time to stop. In less than a minute he was drawing near to the bridge over the little branch where Org and Little Bit had played with the "cannon" a short time before to the complete wreckage of that frail structure. Skeeter knew this bridge was too narrow for him to cross at his present rate of progress, and he began to slow up.

Suddenly Dazzle uttered a terrified shriek and pointed ahead—the bridge was gone!

Skeeter shut off all the power, pressed with all

his strength upon the foot-brake, set his emergency brake with all the muscle in his arm, came to the very edge of the branch, going no faster than a boy could push a wheelbarrow, and—rolled in!

Dazzle Zenor foresaw what would happen and jumped out. But Skeeter was behind the wheel and could not move quick enough, and he went down ten feet into the creek with his little machine.

There was the crack of a broken spring, the explosion of two blown-out tires, the rending, grinding noise of torn fenders, and the terrified wailing of a little barkeeper who had been bounced out into the creek and who had his clothes wet and his feelings hurt and nothing else!

And even that wailing ceased when Skeeter heard what was coming. Dazzle saw it coming first. She could not get off the road because of a barbed-wire fence on each side, so she hopped down into the water of the branch beside Skeeter. And there, crouched beside the bank of the creek, they saw the strangest sight two people ever witnessed.

First, a herd of hogs came squealing to the broken bridge, looked down at them, uttered a surprised series of grunts, split into two parties and ran down into the creek and over into the woods. Next followed a flock of bleating sheep, and they took a look at Skeeter and Dazzle, split into two like the pigs had done, some going down on one side, some on the other, and all of them scattering

in the woods. Then followed a herd of cattle, then a lot of mules and horses, then a great multitude of dogs, then excited men in automobiles, then men, women, and children afoot!

All of them without exception came to the very edge of the branch where the bridge was broken, looked down at Skeeter and Dazzle, expressed surprise either by grunt or squeal or bellow or bray or neigh or yell or laugh—then turned to one side and went down into the branch and into the woods!

By the time this unique procession had arrived at one end of the broken bridge, a farm-wagon drove up and stopped at the other end. The wagon contained Mustard and Hopey Prophet and Popsy Spout on their way to town from the Nigger-Heel plantation. Popsy was asleep.

About seven hundred people had assembled at that spot, and nearly all the live stock in the Parish was out in the woods!

To Skeeter's unbounded amazement he found himself a wounded hero instead of a criminal and a captured fugitive.

"Did the stock run you down on the bridge, Skeeter?" Sheriff Flournoy asked; and that gave Skeeter his cue.

"Yes, suh. De bridge is been pretty rickety a long time, an' dem animiles piled up all aroun' me an' we jes' nachelly all went down."

"If you want to bring suit against this Parish for injuries to yourself and damage to your auto-

mobile, I'll help you," Colonel Gaitskill snapped. "I've been telling that road commissioner to repair this bridge for the last three years, and now he'll get what is coming to him, and we'll make him pay for his neglect of duty."

That word "damages" sounded good to Skeeter.

"I's pretty bad hurt, Marse Tom," he sighed, when he saw a chance to collect money for his injuries. "Bofe ankles is spraint an' my back is busted, an' my neck feels kinder stretched and loose, n' my head——"

"Tell all that to the trial jury," Gaitskill snapped. "You can ride back in the wagon with Mustard Prophet—I think you had better go on right now!"

Mustard drove down into the woods and, crossing the branch, came up on the other side of the broken bridge to the road. It took four men to help Skeeter in the wagon, so great were his injuries after he heard that magic word—damages!

The first place they passed on the way back was the Shin Bone eating-house. Skeeter decided that this was a good place to demonstrate how badly hurt he was, and he could exhibit his disability in the presence of many witnesses.

"I cain't trabbel a inch funder, brudders," he sighed. "I's gittin' weaker an' weaker all de time. You better drap me off here at de resteraw."

So Mustard picked him up from the bed of the wagon, carried him bodily into the eating-house

and laid him out on one of the dining-tables. Dazzle and Hopey and Popsy Spout followed them in, and Shin Bone hurried to see what the trouble was.

"I think I's fixin' to die, Mustard," Skeeter wailed, thrusting his yellow hand into the inside pocket of his coat. "So I passes dis little thing over to you befo' I j'ines de angel band dat toots de horns aroun' de golden throne."

The little thing was a green-plush box containing a rabbit-foot.

"Dat reminds my mind, Mustard," Shin Bone exclaimed, as he beheld the box. "I got somepin dat b'longs to you, too."

He went to his cash-drawer, opened it, and in an apartment underneath he brought out his treasure and handed it to Mustard.

It was a green-plush box containing a rabbit-foot.

Skeeter's eyes nearly popped out of his head. As for Mustard, he was so completely dumfounded that he merely stared at the two green-plush boxes in helpless wonder.

"Whar did you git dis green-plush box, Skeeter?" Mustard asked at last.

"Ask Dazzle," Skeeter wailed. "She knows—you know, too."

"Whar you git yo' green-plush box, Shin?" Mustard asked next, in a tone of superstitious consternation.

"About three weeks ago, ole Popsy Spout went out to yo' house to spend de day. When he got back, he come in here an' et, an' he lef' dis green box on de eatin' table. He explavicated about it a little bit an' said it b'longed to you!"

Mustard turned around with the righteous fury of Michel the archangel contending with the devil to "bring against him a railing accusation"—but, alas, Popsy had taken a hint from Skeeter's recumbent attitude, and was stretched out upon a dining-table sound asleep.

The unexpected duplication of the rabbit-feet and the two boxes had the effect of relieving Skeeter's pretended injuries to the extent that he was able to travel a little farther.

"Take me home, Mustard," he wailed. "Lemme die at home in my own little cabin whut Marse John gib to me."

Mustard quickly understood that what Skeeter really wanted was to get to some place where he could talk about the new complication in the matter of luck charms. He lifted Skeeter in his arms and carried him back to the wagon, leaving Popsy asleep upon the table, and leaving Dazzle and Hopey to find their own conveyance to their house in their own feet.

When Mustard and Skeeter had closed the door upon their conference in Skeeter's cabin, Mustard laid the rabbit-foot on Skeeter's knee.

"You got to take it back, brudder," he said

earnestly. "'Twon't do fer us folks to steal Marse Tom's rabbit-foot. Us is got to ack hones'."

"Mebbe so," Skeeter said doubtfully. "But fur's I'm concerned, Marse Tom kin hop along widout dis foot."

"It cain't be did, Skeeter. You got to take it back."

"I done been hurt in a automobile bust-up," Skeeter protested. "I ain't able to git about. De dorctor will come here in a little while an' examine me fer cote-house damages on account my many injuries."

"I makes dis trade wid you," Mustard replied. "You's got fifty dollars of my money dat you ain't earnt because you didn't recover my lucky foot. I'll gib you dat fifty to tote dis foot back."

"I got you," Skeeter answered promptly. "When do I tote her back?"

"To-morrer night," Mustard told him. "Marse Tom is gibin' a big dinner at his house an' you kin slip in de house while dey is eatin'."

"I'll do it," Skeeter promised. "But dis is de last thing I's gwine do fer you as long as I live. No more detecative stealin' jobs fer me!"

XVII

LUCK AND LOVE

The next day, being Sunday and a dull day, Skeeter found it both convenient and comfortable

to remain in bed and pretend to be severely injured by his automobile accident. He planned to spend the day in bed, and slip out at night and carry the rabbit-foot back to the dresser-drawer in Miss Virginia's room.

But about ten o'clock the road commissioner called upon Skeeter, expressed his great regret at the automobile accident and told Skeeter he had come to settle for the damage that had been done.

"I don't want any lawsuit, Skeeter. It takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of money which has to be paid to the lawyers and the courts. We'll fix this up between ourselves."

"Dat suits me," Skeeter told him.

"I'll have your automobile repaired, put in perfect condition, painted and polished and fixed like new. Besides that I'll give you one hundred dollars."

With these words, he laid the money out on his knee, one hundred dollars in one-dollar bills.

Skeeter sat up, reached for the money, and thrust it under his pillow on the bed.

"Whar do I sign?" he grinned.

The smiling commissioner indicated the dotted line, Skeeter inscribed his name with a flourish, and before that gentleman was out of the yard Skeeter was kicking off the bed covers, preparing to dress and go out.

"Dis here is my lucky day," he announced to his immortal soul.

About this time, Orren Randolph Gaitskill, returning from Sunday-school, met Little Bit who had been waiting for him at the corner for an hour. The two boys played around the streets for a while, then wandered aimlessly down the alley and into a vacant place in the rear of the Gaitskill store. There they found something which interested them very much.

It was a discarded advertisement.

A piece of cardboard, life-size, represented a big, grinning negro man. Both arms were folded across his chest and he was hugging a brand of cured meat called the Hallelujah Ham to his bosom while his great mouth was wide-spread in a toothsome grin of anticipation over its sugar-cured sweetness. Having served its purpose, this cardboard man had been tossed upon the trash heap to be carted away. Org and Little Bit beat the trash man to it and regarded it as a great possession.

They carried the thing to the corner of the street and set it up in the middle of the alley.

A negro woman passed, humming a tune. When she saw the big negro, she jumped to one side with loud bawl:

"My Gawd! Who you tryin' to skeer?"

When she saw it was merely a cardboard standing up, she went laughing down the street.

"This is our lucky day, Little Bit," Org chuckled. "We can have a heap of fun with this

thing. There is plenty of fun scaring people if they don't get mad and fight you afterwards."

"Niggers don't fight when dey is skeart," Little Bit said. "Dey runs."

"But we can't play with this to-day," Org said virtuously, recalling his recent Sunday-school instructions. "This is the Sabbath of the Lord and this big negro man ought to rest on this day. We'll take him up to my house and lay him down in the stable so he can rest."

"Restin' time an' Sonday shore sounds good to a nigger," Little Bit giggled "Even dis here paper pasteboard man is a-grinnin'."

But this was not a day of rest at the Gaitskill home. They were arranging to give a great dinner that evening at which would be announced the engagement of Miss Virginia Gaitskill and Captain Kerley Kerlerac.

All day long Hopey Prophet, famous cook, was preparing that dinner, Dazzle Zenor was helping in the kitchen, Mustard Prophet was errand boy, Skeeter Butts was slipping in and out of Hopey's cabin in the yard, seizing such opportunities as he could find to discuss with Mustard the return of the rabbit-foot.

Org was called in and impressively informed that his beautiful sister was engaged to Captain Kerlerac and the announcement would be made that evening; that he would not be permitted to be at the dinner because he had to be corrected

seventeen times at an ordinary meal, and this occasion was so extraordinary that he was eliminated.

"I don't care—I'm glad I'm out of it," Org growled. "Gince didn't ask me nothing about her business and I'm not going to help her through. Let old Gince go and get herself engaged. Little Bit says that Cap'n Kerley is a easy boss."

"What I want you to do is to be a good boy all day and stay around the house," Mrs. Gaitskill requested.

"I'll promise not to leave this place all day," Org said. "There's nothin' doing on Sunday nohow."

"Thank you," Mrs. Gaitskill said, much relieved by the promise. "If you are very good, I'll promise to do something very nice for you."

"Will you lemme have a party and invite Little Bit?" Org asked.

"Oh, dear! I can't promise what I will do just now," Mrs. Gaitskill smiled.

"Say!" Org exclaimed, struck by a sudden thought. "Don't I get anything to eat out of this?"

"Certainly. But you'll have to wait until the others have eaten."

"Is Little Bit in on the eats, too?"

"Yes."

"We'll be good," Org announced.

And he kept his promise. He and Little Bit played in the stable all day long. About dark it

pleased his fancy to carry his cardboard negro man to the house where there could be no danger of anyone stealing it. At first he thought he would take it up to his own room, then he decided to store it in a room which Colonel Gaitskill called his "office," for he knew that no one would enter that room that night.

The Gaitskill home was arranged in this fashion: Entering the front door a guest stepped into the reception room in the rear of which was a staircase leading to the bedrooms above. On the left of the reception room was the dining-room, behind that the butler's pantry and the kitchen. In the rear of the staircase was a back hall with a flight of back stairs leading to the bed-rooms above. On the right of the reception room was the drawing-room, and in the rear of that, entered by folding doors, was what Mrs. Gaitskill called a library, and Miss Virginia called a den, and Colonel Gaitskill called his office.

In this "office" Org set up his cardboard man, knowing that Gaitskill never entered this room on Sunday, and that no guest would be admitted to it that night.

As Org came out of the room, he was captured by Dazzle Zenor, who conducted him to his room, ordered him to bathe, and superintended his dressing. Then she dismissed him with instructions not to leave the house and hastened to assist Miss Virginia with her toilet.

Orren sneaked down to the dining-room and gazed with awe at the wonderfully picturesque table; boylike, he began to seek what he might devour. There was nothing good to eat on the table yet, nothing on the sideboard. He pulled open a door in the sideboard, and found far back a cut-glass dish full of candies.

"Oo-oo!" he exclaimed. "Candy mints! They put 'em way back here to hide 'em from me!" and he filled his pockets.

Then he smuggled Little Bit up-stairs to his room to keep him company, and showed him the candy mints.

"Dat looks good to me," the little negro said.

"I bet it'll make our mouths run water to eat 'em. When eatin' time comes, us is gwine ex-pe'unce joy."

"We'll lay 'em on this table till everybody goes to eating down-stairs," Org said.

There were some Tickfall notables at that dinner.

There was Dr. Sentelle, clergyman, a hang-over from Civil War times, an unreconstructed rebel, a cripple since Antietam, whose voice was music, whose speech was eloquence, and every word a caress; whose face was beautiful, written all over with the literature of experience. There was John Flournoy, who had served forty years as sheriff of the Parish, a man with the physical frame of an ox, the strength of Samson, a mouth like a bear

trap, and the gentle heart of a woman—the little children followed him on the streets. There was Judge Haddan, a pale, sickly man with a weak voice, trembling hands, and the stooped shoulders of the student; but his head was massive and Websterian, his eyes glowed like the eyes of some jungle beast, and no man within the borders of the State commanded more respect as a lawyer and a jurist. There was Colonel Gaitskill, the host, serene, powerful, with his snow-white beard and hair, his face glowing like an alabaster vase with a lamp in it, such a man as one beholds once in a lifetime and remembers forever. And around these a bevy of women and girls who had known these men since their babyhood.

And there was the girl of the evening, Miss Virginia Harwick Gaitskill, descendant of a long line of beautiful women and handsome men, her skin like the faint iridescence of pearls, her eyes like cornflower sapphires, her hair like cobweb, thick and wavy, colored like the heart of a ripe chestnut burr, her whole face like pearl and pomegranate and peachbloom, with the amber nimbus above it always from that soft brown hair, her laughter light and happy like a Sicilian shepherd's reed, and her heart like oil on salt sea-water—all the beauties of the world moving, circling, advancing, retreating, but smoothing out all ruffled surfaces and stilling the storm!

And Captain Kerley Kerlerac, such a man as

every mother wants her son to be that he might fill her heart and satisfy her love completely—but it is customary to ignore the man in a case like this, or dismiss him with faint praise.

The dinner was about half finished when Little Bit, in Orren's room up-stairs, looked longingly at the candy mints upon the little table and remarked:

"All dem eaters down dar makes me feel hongry."

"Me, too. Less eat our candy mints," Org suggested.

"I'll bet dey'll make my mouf water when I gits 'em inside," Little Bit chuckled. "My mouf is been waterin' jes' to look at 'em."

Indeed, they did make his mouth water.

These candy mints were not what Orren Randolph Gaitskill thought they were. They were shaped like candy mints, but they contained no candy and no mint; they were little wafers, which dropped in water in the finger-bowls, would effervesce, causing the water to bubble and sparkle and look pretty.

Both boys grabbed a handful of these things and poured them in their mouths.

They tasted sweet. The saliva moistened them, and suddenly one of them exploded in each mouth. It was a very slight explosion, just enough to cause all the tablets to crumble into tiny pieces and get under their tongues and between their

teeth, and fill the entire cavity of the mouth like an expanding balloon.

When the explosion occurred in Little Bit's mouth, that little darky felt like the whole top of his head had been blown off, and he opened his mouth and uttered a startled bellow.

Then in both mouths, each little globule began to explode as the moisture penetrated it. Half a dozen popped under each tongue, several cracked between the teeth of the boys, and the vibration of the nerves of the teeth made them feel as if there was a sound like a pistol shot at each tiny explosion.

"Poison!" Org gurgled.

"P'ison!" Little Bit seconded.

The two boys decided that they needed expert medical attention at once. Dr. Moseley was down in the dining-room. They would not wait for him to come up; they would go down to him! They ran down the hall and galloped down the back steps, their feet making as much racket as a pair of mules crossing the gangplank of a steam-boat. They burst into the dining-room, foaming at the mouth, their frothy tongues protruding, gargling their words as they tried to speak. Little Bit, his coal-black face smeared with foamy white bubbles, looked like he had swallowed the handle of a shaving brush and left the soapy end sticking out!

"I'm poisoned!" Org gargled.

"My Gawd! I'm p'isoned!" Little Bit squalled.

Simultaneously with the startling advent of the children in the dining-room, there came a scream, so shrill, so terror-fraught, so penetrating, that all the guests sprang to their feet in consternation.

From the kitchen, Dazzle Zenor's voice sounded like a steam whistle:

"Oh, my Gawd! A alligator is tryin' to git in dis kitchen!"

Almost instantly in the reception-room there was a sound like the delivery of a ton of coal——

Skeeter Butts had fallen down-stairs!

Hokey Prophet, hearing all the commotion, started from the pantry to see what it was about; glancing across the back hall into Colonel Tom Gaitskill's office, she beheld a strange negro man with a broad grin on his black face, hugging a Hallelujah Ham to his bosom!

She hurled herself into the dining-room among the astounded guests, her fat arms stretched up toward the ceiling, her dough-like face ashen with fright as she bawled at the top of her voice:

"Fer Gade 'lmighty's sake, white folks! Dar's a big nigger man in Marse Tom's library!"

When Mustard Prophet heard Dazzle's scream of fright, he rushed from a little side porch where he was waiting to serve the cream when they were ready, taking a pistol from his pocket as he ran. There had been no doubt in Mustard's mind that he had really seen an alligator in the orchard the

day before and he had armed himself for protection in case he saw it again.

But before Mustard got to the kitchen, he heard the sound made by Skeeter Butts in his tumble down the front stairs, so he changed his course and started in that direction.

Just as Mustard arrived in the reception room, he heard Hopey's wild whoop and her statement that a strange negro was in the library. So Mustard ran across the drawing-room floor, pushed open the folding doors and entered the library, knocking over in his haste a cardboard representation of a negro man who stood holding a Hallelujah Ham to his bosom. Approaching from the rear of this figure, Mustard could not see what it was. It fell face downward and nobody recognized it.

Captain Kerley Kerlerac hastily excused himself from the table, stepped into the back hall on his way to the library. Looking about for a suitable weapon, he laid hold upon Orren's baseball bat standing in the corner.

He entered the library through one door just as Mustard entered it through the other. Kerlerac closed his door behind him, thus shutting out the light from the little back hall by which Hopey had been able to see the cardboard figure, and which would have shown Kerlerac that the negro was Mustard whom he confronted. But Kerlerac was in the dark, and Mustard had the light from

the drawing-room behind him. What Kerlerac saw was a big negro with a big pistol in his hand.

The battle began at once!

Mustard shot ten times at Captain Kerlerac, the bullets flying in every direction. Three of them entered the dining-room among the guests, having no effect except to splash the diners out of that room, like a brick splashes water when dropped into a puddle of mud!

The last bullet in Mustard's pistol skimmed along the cheek of Kerlerac, making a long, painful cut, just under the lobe of his ear, adding one more bullet wound to the two he had previously received when he was fighting for Uncle Sam in the world war.

Then the captain's baseball bat landed on the top of Mustard's head and Mustard sank to the floor unconscious.

Kerlerac walked over with the intention of pounding the negro's head to a jelly, but just then——

From a little house in the yard by the side of the residence, there sounded the thrilling scream of Miss Virginia Gaitskill. The woman he loved! A moment later she began to shriek, and in her tones were all the concentrated essence of agonized terror!

Miss Virginia, in her effort to escape from the flying bullets, had run out of the house through the kitchen. As she rushed out of the door into

the yard, the light from the door shone full into the eyes of a six-foot alligator. He opened his mouth wide at her approach, and when she screamed, he snapped his jaws like a bear-trap!

The shrieking girl fled for refuge to the storehouse.

Alas!

A stream of sweetness from a barrel of ribbon-cane sirup had been running from the spigot for two days and one night. Over the floor of that storehouse was a pool of molasses one inch deep.

Virginia stepped into that mess and both her dainty slippers stuck! She screamed. She tried to retreat and stepped out of both her slippers, and her feet stood ankle-deep in the molasses. Then came a series of shrieks which were the essence of agonized terror!

Captain Kerley Kerlerac, leaving Mustard unconscious upon the floor, ran to the rescue of the beauty in distress. Plunging out of the kitchen door, he leaped over something which looked like an old mud-caked log, and which snapped at him viciously as he passed.

Failing to get a bite of the captain's leg, the alligator walked around to the front of the house.

Kerlerac hurled himself through the door of the storehouse like a catapult.

Alas for the hero! Both feet landed in the molasses, both feet slipped from under him, he fell flat on his back, rolled over and over in the sweet-

ness, and stopped his progress only when both feet struck against the empty barrel from which all that saccharine had dripped!

He sprang up, threw his sweet arms around the woman he loved, drew her close to his sirupy form, laid his bleeding cheek against her amber hair, and carried her forth to safety!

In the meantime, Skeeter Butts was lying in the reception room under a leather couch, grasping the green-plush box in his nervous hand.

He had started up-stairs to restore it to its rightful owner, just as Org and Little Bit, thinking they were poisoned, had run down the hallway above in their flight to the dining-room. Skeeter had turned his body to retreat, had lost his balance, and had fallen down the steps, taking refuge under the leather couch, where he was happy to remain during the subsequent scenes of that memorable night.

When the screams of Miss Virginia Gaitskill attracted all the guests to the rear of the house, Skeeter crawled from under the couch, crawled across the reception room, slipped out of the front door and began to crawl toward the gate.

Someone in the house turned the electric switch, causing the globe light on the front porch to flash up. Skeeter jumped, hastily concealed himself behind a bit of shrubbery, and glancing around him nervously, found himself squatting within two feet of an immense alligator.

The alligator opened his mouth like a door to the pit of the nether regions, and Skeeter, with that peculiar impulse which everyone has to strike, or throw something, at a peril, hurled the green-plush box into the alligator's gaping mouth!

The jaws snapped together and the box containing the rabbit-foot was gone.

By that time Skeeter was gone too.

As soon as Mustard Prophet was identified, half a dozen armed men from the dinner party patrolled the lawn with guns and flash-lights, hunting for the negro whom Hopey had seen. The alligator, disturbed by the flash-light, which whipped across the grass, crawled under the fence into the horse-pasture, and was there discovered and killed by Sheriff Flournoy.

Skeeter Butts, who was hiding in the bushes just across the road, drew a big sigh of relief.

"Dem white mens is done killed a alligator whut's got five fooks an' dey don't know it," he chuckled. "One foot is gone down de red lane of his gullet in a cute green box!"

Skeeter waited until the men returned to the house and then moved away.

"I knows whar dat rabbit-foot is," he muttered. "But I ain't gwine atter it. No Jonah in de whale fer me!"

Over in the negro settlement called Dirty-Six, Skeeter entered the Hen-Scratch saloon, saying nothing of the exciting scenes he had witnessed

that night. But his mind dwelt upon them, as evidenced by a song which he sang again and again:

“Some folks do not believe
Dat a whale could Jonah receive
But dat don’t make my tale a-tall untrue.
Dar are whales on eve’y side
Wid deir mouths open wide
An’ you better look out or one will swallow you!”

XVIII

THE KISS

Ten days had passed.

At the Nigger-Heel plantation Mustard Prophet, nursing a battered head, was curing an alligator skin which he had nailed upon a barn door, and was keeping careful guard over two green-plush boxes, each containing a rabbit-foot.

Mustard entered the junk-room full of Marse Tom’s curiosities, opened a drawer in a desk, and brought forth the two luck charms which had caused him so much trouble.

“It ’pears to me like dese here lef’ hind foots is lost dere power,” he muttered to himself.

He held up one box which looked rather messy, because Mustard had rescued it from an alligator’s stomach. He continued his soliloquy:

“Now you take de hist’ry of dis here foot:

Cap'n Kerlerac gib dis'n to Miss Virginia Gaitskill fifteen years ago when she warn't nothin' but a little ole spindle-leg gal. An' whut come to pass? Her paw an' maw died in furin parts somewhar an' she had to move back to Tickfall. Little Bit tole little Marse Org dat a rabbit-foot fotch luck, so he stole dis'n out of his sister's room, swiped a pipe an' smoked rabbit terbacker, an' mighty nigh died. When Skeeter Butts tuck Org home an seen dis rabbit-foot, he thought it wus mine an' I thought it wus mine because it looked jes' like mine. So I sneaked up to Miss Virginia's room to steal it back, an' I had my hand on de very place whar it wus, when dat little ole Org boy skeart de gizzard outen me, playin' Indian an' whoopin' behime my back.

"An' Skeeter swiped dis foot fer me, an' hopped in his automobile to make his escapement, an' he run off a busted bridge into de Cooley bayou, chased by all de hawks an' sheeps an' cattle an' hosses an' mules an' dawgs an' mens in Tickfall. Atter dat, Skeeter tried to fotch dis rabbit-foot back to Miss Virginia because it 'twarn't de one we wanted, an' he had dis foot on his own pusson when he tuck dat hell-bustin' tumble down Marse Tom's steps, an' he had it in his hand when he snuck across de yard an' dat alligator tried to eat him up. Den Skeeter throwed dis rabbit-foot, plush box an' all, down dat alligator's gullet, an' whut happened to dat varmint atter he swallowed

dis foot, an' had all de luck inside his own hide? He got kilt!"

He laid this unlucky foot back in the green-plush box, placed it reverently in the drawer, shaking his head over the mystery how a luck charm could be attended with so much misfortune.

"Naw, suh, dis'n is done lost de power," he announced.

Then he lifted the other green-plush box, lifted a rabbit-foot out of it, and gazed with sacred awe upon this talisman.

"Dis here is Marse Tom's left hind foot of a rabbit kilt in a graveyard in de dark of de moon," he announced. "But take de secret myst'ry of de hist'ry of dis here foot: it wus in Marse Tom's own house when all dat rousement touck place an' busted up Miss Virginia's party. An' I had dis foot in my own coat pocket on my own pussonal self when Cap'n Kerley busted my head wid dat bat an' I mighty nigh shot his snout off wid my pistol!"

Mustard Prophet reached up and tenderly caressed a bandage upon his wounded head.

"Naw, suh," he sighed. "'Tain't resomble to me dat dis foot is still got de authority. I'll keep it, but I don't never trust it no more. Mr. On-lucky Foot, I axes you good-by!"

He solemnly placed his thick lips upon the cushiony bottom of the rabbit's foot, and kissed it farewell.

In Gaitskill's stable in Tickfall, an ideal play-house for two boys, Orren Randolph Gaitskill and Little Bit had formed a joint ownership over eleven interesting objects: One baseball bat which had "busted a nigger's head," and ten pistol bullets which had been extracted from the walls in the Gaitskill home. At frequent intervals an argument started between them as to which of the ten bullets had wounded Captain Kerley Kerlerac in the face.

"Ef I knowed which one it wus, I'd shore tote it roun' wid me fer luck," Little Bit said.

"This bat is a lucky bat. It blooded Mustard's head. But we can't carry it around for luck," Org said.

"Naw, suh, but we can kiss it fer luck," Little Bit proclaimed.

"That's right," Org said. "You kiss one end and I'll kiss the other."

They solemnly held it up between them, and white lips and black lips caressed opposite ends of the big stick.

In the Gaitskill home, Captain Kerley Kerlerac entered and asked for Virginia. This was his tenth call since the night of the dinner ten days before. But now, for the first time, the bandage was removed from his face.

A long red scar marked the face from the point of the chin to the lobe of the ear.

For the first time Virginia saw that mark which

he would carry to his grave. Kerlerac noticed that look of distress, but he had a little question which he often asked, and it always had the effect of diverting her mind from anything, however important, to something which was vastly more important.

"Do you love me as much as ever?" he asked quietly.

But the girl could not take her eyes from the long red scar. Her chin quivered with emotion and her lips drooped with the pain of the thought of that night of comedy when he had to suffer this wound.

"Stoop over and I'll tell you," she whispered.

He bent his head to hear the whisper from her fragrant lips.

She put both arms around his neck and kissed the scar upon his cheek.

The 'Fraid Cat

I

"I's glad de kunnel an' ole miss is gone to N'Awleens," Hopey Prophet remarked as she sank her thickly upholstered body into a deeply upholstered chair in the Gaitskill drawing-room. "I likes to take a seat an' set down in de white folks' parlor an' ack white."

"If de kunnel knowed we wus settin' in dis bood-war, he'd bu'st our necks," Dazzle Zenor giggled as she sat down on the stool at the grand piano and ran der slim ebony fingers over the white keys.

"I'll shore fergit to tell him whar we spent our time while he wus gone," Hopey chuckled, as she raised herself from the chair and waddled across the room to turn on all the electric lights. "Whut Marse Tom ain't know won't hurt us."

"I needs a beau to entertain me in dis nice room," Dazzle smiled, looking up at the chandelier now blazing with light. "All dis noble arrangement is wasted on me 'thout no man to see me in de middle of it."

"Dat remark shows dat Skeeter Butts is still

pesterin' yo' mind," Hopey told her. "Ef he takes a notion to pay a call-visit, I'll shore set right here an' chapperoon him."

"Us won't need you," the girl remarked in a dreamy tone as she ran her fingers down the keyboard of the piano. "Skeeter shore do look brave in his soldier suit."

"Brave!" Hopey snorted. "Brave! Dat Skeeter Butts is de biggest coward in de Nunitied States of Loozanny!"

"He ain't!" Dazzle protested.

"He am!" Hopey insisted, nodding her big head on her fat shoulders. "Skeeter ain't never seed nothin' in his life dat he wusn't skeart of. He's a nachel-bawn 'fraid-cat!"

"I don't b'lieve dat," Dazzle snapped. "Didn't he go off an' jine de army at de fust offstartin' of de war?"

"Suttin he did!" Hopey chuckled. "But how come? Three nigger womens wus in dis town on de very same day; each one had a weddin' license to marry Skeeter Butts—an' you wus one of dem three womens! An' whut did Skeeter up an' do?"

"He volunteered to jine de army."

"Shore! He wus forced to volunteer! Don't dat show he's a coward an' a 'fraid-cat?" Hopey howled. "Why didn't he stay in Tickfall like a brave man an' marry dem three nigger womens?"

"He didn't run because he wus skeart," Dazzle asserted in Skeeter's defense. "He jined de army

because a lifelong war wid three nigger women wives is too much of a muchness fer even a brave soldier like Skeeter."

"I wish dat Mr. Bill Kaiser's war had kotch him," Hopey growled disloyally. "I bet dem Hunches would 'a' throwed a skeer into Skeeter dat mought 'a' skeart all de skeer out of him."

"Skeeter wus a brave soldier," Dazzle repeated obstinately.

"Soldier!" Hopey repeated with a contemptuous sniff. "Skeeter wusn't nothin' but a boot-black in de army, totin' pink notes to de kunnel fer de lady folks."

"Skeeter told me dat him an' de military kunnel looked fer Mr. Bill Kaiser eve'ywhar," Dazzle informed her. "It wus Mr. Bill dat wus skeart of Skeeter. He hid out, an' Skeeter couldn't connect up wid him or find him nowhars. Skeeter is a dangersome nigger."

"Skeeter wus jes' tryin' to locate Mr. Kaiser so he would know whut place to stay away from," Hopey growled. "He imagined he warn't skeart of de Hunches, but he warn't aimin' to let de Hunches *run* him."

"'Tain't so," Dazzle answered sharply. "I bet ef I wus in danger right now, Skeeter would come up here an' rescue me."

"Suttinly," Hopey grumbled. "Fust-off, he'd break a leg runnin' up to Sheriff Flournoy's orfice to git de sheriff to he'p him, because he growed up in

Marse John's house, an' he is de sheriff's little pet nigger. Next-off, he'd git all de white folks an' niggers in town and lead 'em up on dis hill. Den he'd sneak aroun' behime a tree an' wait till de rookus wus over, an' at de last he'd hop in an' ack like he done it all!"

Dazzle was angry. She glared at Hopey with fine rage, and tried to think of something to say that would crush the fat woman flat. But nothing but a falling planet would ever flatten Hopey, so that young colored actress with several histrionic manifestations of intense indignation flounced out of the room, followed by the exasperating chuckles of the victorious Hopey Prophet.

In the rear hallway Dazzle paused at sight of the telephone. Her milk-white teeth gnawed at her lower lip as she debated something in her mind. Then, with an air of decision, she sat down at the desk and lifted the receiver from the hook.

"Central, I wants to talk to de Hen-Scratch saloon, please, ma'am!"

After a moment's wait something popped in her ear, and a voice spoke: "Hello!"

"Is dat you, Skeeter Butts? Listen! Dis here am Dazzle Zenor. I's at Marse Tom Gaitskill's home wid Hopey Prophet. Somebody is tryin' to bu'st in dis house an' rob it——"

A squealing shriek sounded so sharply in Dazzle's ear that she jerked her head away from

the receiver, ceased speaking, and waited until the vocal disturbances had subsided.

"Dey is tryin' to bu'st in de front door, Skeeter!" Dazzle told him. "Me an' Hopey lef' de kitchen door onlocked so Vinegar Atts could come in when he got back. Ef dem robbers goes aroun' to de back side de house, dey'll shore git in. Come up here right away an' rescue us!"

A squealing interrogation sounded through the phone, and Dazzle smiled as she answered:

"Dar ain't more'n seven robbers, Skeeter. But you kin lick 'em like you done in de army. Don't git skeart!"

Although Skeeter's reply was not intelligible, his shrieking voice, in reply, was audible even in the drawing-room, where Hopey sat shaking like a jelly-bowl with laughter.

"Come all alone by yo'se'f, Skeeter!" Dazzle implored him. "Us don't want no crowd up here an' no excitemunt. Don't tell no white folks!"

Dazzle paused to listen to a few more excited squawkings from the telephone, then she commanded:

"Come by yo'se'f, an' come in a hurry, befo' I gits kilt! Fer Gawd's sake, hurry, Skeeter!"

She left the telephone and entered the room where Hopey sat, smiling with great satisfaction.

"You done played a fool now!" Hopey told her.

Dazzle preened herself before a mirror in preparation for Skeeter's arrival.

"Skeeter's comin', Hopey," Dazzle giggled. "'Tain't no matter how big a coward a feller is, he's afraid to cornfess dat he's a 'fraid-cat!"

II

Skeeter Butts hung up the receiver at his end of the line and staggered across the Hen-Scratch saloon. His face was convulsed, and the odd distortions due to the contraction and relaxation of its muscles would lead one to believe that an electric shock received over the telephone had twisted his face and he was trying to set it right.

Skeeter had received a shock. Four friends, beholding him, noted that his face was bloodless, his yellow fingers trembled and were beyond his control, his knees shook and buckled under him as he walked, and his chin was aquiver.

"Bad luck, niggers," he whined through chattering teeth. "A band of robbers has busted into Marse Tom Gaitskill's house, an' dey is killin' Dazzle Zenor."

The four men sitting at the table quivered with excitement mingled with fear. With that emotional race, any sort of excitement is expressed by noise, but fear calls for silence. For a brief time the silence was so great that the five could distinctly hear the ticking of Hitch Diamond's big silver watch.

Hitch Diamond, the big prize-fighter, sat in a

rickety chair. As he meditated upon the possibilities of the case which Skeeter had stated, and his emotions increased, that chair produced an irritating squeak with every inhalation and expulsion of Hitch's breath. All the noise produced in that room was caused by Hitch's watch and his chair. The rest were like frightened quail that squat and try to merge with the scenery.

It seemed to be a long, long time before anyone ventured to break that oppressive silence. Finally Hitch spoke bravely:

"Go up an' rescue Dazzle, Skeeter. I'll be glad to stay behime an' take keer of de saloon."

Four chairs moved uneasily, emitting a scraping sound. Figger Bush pulled a corn cob pipe from his pocket, and his trembling hands caused the stem to drop from the cob and fall under the table. Figger stooped to pick it up, found that it was dark under the table, and straightened up without his pipe-stem. He could get that pipe-stem to-morrow.

"Me, too," Figger Bush quacked. "I'll he'p Hitchie keep de saloon."

Mustard Prophet, the scientific agriculturist of the party, took a big red apple from his pocket and bit deeply into its juicy substance. He was trying to appear disinterested, but his favorite kind of apple was tasteless to him now.

"Dar ain't no use fer de rest of us to go," Mustard muttered thickly, munching at his apple, and

glancing at Pap Curtain. "Skeeter kin handle de case——"

"You got to go wid me, Mustard," Skeeter interrupted. "Dazzle tole me dat Hopey wus in de house, too—an' de robbers is killin' her."

The part of the apple Mustard held in his fingers slipped away and rolled across the saloon floor; the part he had in his mouth strangled in his quivering throat.

"Dat's too bad," he announced in a tone of disinterested sympathy. "But dat serves Hopey right, an' she deeserves all she gits. Me an' my nigger wife don't speak no more. I went dar to-night, an' axed Hopey to gimme some hot biscuits an' a few sirup, an' she wouldn't do it!"

"I think dis here is yo' job, Skeeter," Pap Curtain snarled, the habitual sneer upon his face becoming more acute and repulsive as he tried to conceal his timidity. "Dazzle didn't want none of us buttin' in, or she'd axed fer us. Ef you wants to make a hit wid Dazzle, you got to pick up a brave heart an' go out dar an' kill dat band of robbers—jes' like when you wus in de army."

"But us army soldiers didn't do no fightin' all by our lonely selfs," Skeeter wailed. "We fi't an' bled an' died in regimints!"

"You oughter hab fotch yo' army home wid you," Pap sneered. "Somepin like dis might happen sudden any time, an' you knowed you'd need it."

The telephone rang sharply, and every man jumped with fright.

"Gosh, dat skeart me!" Pap Curtain exclaimed. "Answer de telerphome, Skeeter."

"Answer de telerphome, Figger," Skeeter squalled, feeling nervously in all his pockets as if he were hunting for the most important thing in the world and could not abandon the search.

"My shoe-string is come ontied," Figger answered as he bent over his foot. "You answer de phome, Mustard!"

Mustard did not move. The telephone bell subsided with a final little tinkle.

"Dar now, it's too late!" Mustard lamented. "I'd 'a' answered, only but I'm total deaf in one y-ear."

The telephone rang again, sharply, insistently; rang for a good five minutes.

"Answer it, Hitch Diamond!" Skeeter wailed in the midst of the sound.

Hitch pretended not to hear.

"I bet dat is Hokey telerphomin' me dat she's dead," Mustard Prophet muttered in pitiful fright. "I won't never git no more hot biscuits. Hokey wus shore a good cook an' a good wife. Us had little spats, but dar warn't never no hard feelin's."

"Come on, fellers," Skeeter interrupted. "Less go up on de hill an' see whut's happened."

"I ain't gwine in dat house!" Pap Curtain exclaimed. "I don't like to see blood spilt aroun' all over Marse Tom's nice carpets."

"I hope dey don't spile de floor too much," Hitch grumbled as he rose to his feet. "Marse Tom always makes me scrub up de messes because Hopey's too dang fat to lean over."

"I'll let Pap guard de front of de house an' hide behime de big pecan-tree," Skeeter announced, glad enough to get company. "Hitch kin guard de kitchen by hidin' behime de meat-house. Figger an' Mustard kin guard each side of de house by layin' on de groun' outside de lawn-fence."

While Skeeter was issuing these orders, Little Bit had entered the saloon, and stood listening. When Skeeter ended, he spoke:

"I's gwine guard de Hen-Scratch by hidin' behime de bar counter," he giggled, without an idea what all the excitement was about.

"Whar you been at, you little debbil?" Skeeter Butts snapped, whirling about to face the Hen-Scratch's factotum. "You stay an' keep dis saloon—an' ef de telerphome rings, you answer it."

Skeeter ran to a little safe in the corner of the saloon and brought forth four guns, which he distributed to their rightful owners; then he took his own automatic from behind the bar, and the five negroes started in a swift run for Gaitskill's home.

By the time they had climbed to the top of the hill on which the fine colonial home was located, they entered the yard, breathless and panting. From that high point they could look out over the village, glowing in the darkness like a great fire-

fly, with its countless lights on the crooked streets and its glowing windows. But their attention was concentrated upon the house before them. The drawing-room glowed with brilliant light.

Four of the men quickly went to the places assigned them and dropped down in hiding. Skeeter sneaked from shrub to shrub, lay down and crawled around rose-bushes, ran from the shelter of one tree across the exposed and open places to the grateful shelter of another tree, until he came close to one of the lighted windows. Reaching up, he straddled the limb over his head and looked fearfully into the drawing-room.

He saw Hopey and Dazzle seated very comfortably. They seemed to be very much amused at something, for they laughed constantly.

"Dis here is some kind of joke," Skeeter muttered to himself as he dropped from the limb. "I'll sneak in de kitchen an' come through de house an' supprise 'em."

Slipping to the rear, he emitted a low whistle and located Hitch Diamond by the meat-house, which gave him the courage to open the door of the dark kitchen and enter.

There was not a negro in this rescue-party who was not thoroughly familiar with the Gaitskill home. In the years past they had served in that house in every capacity, and knew every room and closet, and the contents of each. There were a dozen other homes in Tickfall with which they

were equally familiar, for the good house servant is a privileged character in the house, and his presence in the home is coveted by every house-keeper.

So it was no trouble for Skeeter to find his way in the dark to the lighted drawing-room.

A bellow of fright from Hopey and a squeal of terror from Dazzle greeted him as he stepped from behind a door with a pistol in his hand.

"Whut you got to say now, Hopey?" Dazzle exclaimed, when she recovered from her fright. "I tole you Skeeter wus a brave nigger——"

There was a loud clatter at the front door, and Pap Curtain's voice spoke:

"Open dis door, Skeeter! Hurry!"

Skeeter sprang to the door and threw it open. Little Bit, panting, dripping with perspiration, and almost exhausted, was pushed into the room by Pap Curtain, who had to support him to prevent his falling to the floor. In the blaze of light which came through the open door, Figger and Mustard and Hitch got the courage to come out from their hiding-places and listen.

"Bad luck, Skeeter!" Little Bit panted. "I ain't know whut kind of nigger bizziness dis is, but you-all is got yo'selfs in a jam."

"How you know?" Skeeter quavered.

"I answered de telerphone," Little Bit gasped.

"Whut did it say?" Skeeter asked desperately.

"It say—it say— de gal at de telerphone orfice

say she listened in when Dazzle phomed to you, an' dat she has called all de white folks in Tickfall up an' tole 'em dat Marse Tom's house wus being robbed!"

Thereupon Hopey Prophet walked to the electric-light switch and turned out every light. There are those who love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

"Listen!" Pap exclaimed tragically. "I kin hear dem white folks comin' now!"

Indeed, it was not difficult to hear the sound of running feet. A moment later could be heard the galloping feet of horses. Then automobile lights began to whip the darkness as they turned the corners at high speed and roared like speeding beasts as they came up the long hill. Then, in the darkness, a great light fell on Skeeter.

"Us niggers oughtn't to be here when de white folks come," he wailed. "Ef dey ketch us in here, dey'll put us in jail. Ef dey see us leavin', dey'll shoot us!"

"Easy, eve'ybody!" Pap Curtain hissed as he opened the front door. "Git still!"

Then a low sigh of disappointment escaped from every throat. The front lawn was all aquiver with the dark shadows of moving men!

"Good-by, fair world!" Figger Bush whimpered. "Us is caught like a bug in a jug."

"Shut up!" Pap Curtain snarled. "Whar kin we hide?"

"Git up on de roof!" Skeeter Butts suggested. "Dar's a ladder in de attic, an' we kin climb through a trap-door to de roof."

Eight negroes went shuffling up the steps toward the top of the house just as the clatter of feet sounded upon the porch, and the front door was pushed open.

Four perspiring negroes boosted Hopey up the ladder, and pushed her capacious form through the narrow square opening to the roof. Then they cautiously lowered the door and gratefully seated themselves upon it.

"Safe!" Skeeter exulted. "U's is safe!"

Alas! He did not know that the door he was sitting on had a catch-lock on the inside, and that he and his friends were on that roof to stay until rescued!

III

From their observatory upon the roof, our friends beheld a mob of men surround the house and cautiously inspect all the lawn, the outhouses, and the land surrounding. Half a dozen men under the direction of Sheriff Flournoy searched the house, lighting up every room, looking in every closet, examining every corner, and peering under every bed.

"I reckon the robbers, if any, got away, fellows," Flournoy announced as he came out on the front

porch. "We canno find anybody, and cannot see that anything has been disturbed."

"Where are the niggers who raised the alarm?" a voice asked.

"I guess they hit the grit," Flournoy smiled. "I can't imagine Hopey and Dazzle staying to see what a burglar wanted, or returning to see what he got."

"Here's one nigger has showed up!" a voice responded.

"White folks!" Vinegar Atts bawled as he was pushed into the light through a crowd of men. "Whut done happened to Marse Tom's house?"

"Where have you been?" Flournoy snapped.

"Jes' got back from a chu'ch religious meetin'," Vinegar explained. "Marse Tom lef' me an' Hopey in charge of dis house, an' he ain't gwine approve his lawn gittin' trompled up wid white folks."

"Somebody tried to rob this house while you were away," Flournoy told him.

Vinegar's eyes opened until they glowed in the light from the porch like two china door-knobs.

"Did you-all good white folks ketch de robber?"

"No."

"Did de robber steal anything?"

"No."

"Whar is Hopey at?"

"The robber may have kidnapped her."

"You's prankin' wid me, Marse John," Vinegar

howled. "Dar ain't no one robber could kidnack Hopey. Dat wus a *band* of robbers—I surmises about fawty in de gang."

Vinegar fumbled with his hat, and his breath came and went in labored gasps.

"I'm glad de robbers never stole nothin'," he sighed. "Dat house am plum' full of pretty doodads, an' ef Marse Tom wus to come home an' find dem rooms empty, I'd hab to *esplain* to him. An' Marse Tom cain't onderstand nothin'—when a nigger esplains."

Vinegar shook his head in great perplexity over this particular white man's mental fulness. One of the mysteries of his life was that he had never put anything across with Colonel Gaitskill. He knew the end from the beginning, and all the ramifications thereof, and with him, Vinegar's explanations never explained. They merely caused complications.

"Whut is us gwine do now, Marse John?" he asked.

"I'm going to leave you to guard this house until daylight," Flournoy told him. "Then I'll come and examine it more carefully."

"I ain't got to guard it from de inside, is I, Marse John?" Vinegar asked in frightened tones.

"Yes—no, I think you had better stay outside," Flournoy replied in a meditative tone. "If you go inside, you'll go to sleep. If you stay out, the

weather is 'most too cool to sleep comfortably, and you will have intervals of wakefulness."

"I ain't gwine sleep wid no band of burglars trapesin' aroun'," Vinegar assured him stoutly. "But I'll feel a whole heap safer on de outside."

"I'll leave an automatic shotgun and two pistols with you, Vinegar," Flournoy said. "Now you sit down by that tree over there and keep watch. Hear me?"

"I prefers to stand up an' keep watch, Marse John," Vinegar said as he placed the two pistols in his pocket and reached out for the gun. "I never could shoot good settin' down."

"You can't run good settin' down, either, can you?" Flournoy said mockingly.

"Naw, suh, I cain't git a real good runnin' start," Vinegar chuckled.

"If you see anybody, don't you run—you shoot!" Flournoy snapped. "But don't shoot until we all get off this lot."

"Dis here powder an' shot don't cost me nothin'," Vinegar grinned. "I'll shore shoot—but I ain't sayin' dat I won't run. My religium teaches me to exoncise discretion."

Thereupon the crowd, with much joking and loud laughter, wandered off toward the town. They assembled in various popular resorts for liquid refreshment, and then went home for the night.

Vinegar stood under the tree in the silence and

darkness. His first thought was that he would stand like a watchful sentinel all night long. But the novelty of standing guard over a silent, unlighted house soon wore off, especially when, as he expressed it, "standing up ailed his feets."

He sat down "to rest his feets," removing his shoes for greater comfort. He had spent many years of his life on that hill, and it had always seemed to be a populous place up to that night. Now it was lonely and lonesome; nobody to talk to but himself, a poor listener and an unedifying conversationalist.

Sitting upright "ailed his back." He shuffled along the ground on the seat of his trousers until he felt the trunk of the tree as a support for his spine. Holding the chilly barrel of his shotgun "ailed his hands"; sitting upon the two pistols in his hip pockets "ailed his thighs." He laid his weapons aside within easy reach.

The ground was warmer than the trunk of the tree against which he was leaning. It wouldn't do for his back to get chilled—he might catch "de Spanish fluence." So he placed the spine of his back level with the earth and permitted the genial warmth of the soil to permeate his massive frame from his head to his heels. Lying flat upon the ground "ailed his head." He reached for his shoes, placed them under his head for a pillow, looked straight up in the sky and counted three stars—four—seven—fo'teen——

About that time, eight negroes who had been crouched in very cramped attitudes on the steep roof, stood up to ease themselves and seek more comfortable positions.

"How we gwine git word to Vinegar 'thout gittin' our fool heads shot off?" Pap Curtain whispered, looking down into the yard, where he could see a dark mass under a tree.

"Telerphone him," Little Bit suggested.

"Us mought start to sing a religious toon," Figger Bush, vocalist, proposed. "Dat'll ca'm his mind an' make him peaceful."

"Wid all dem guns on him, we wants him to favor peace," Skeeter agreed.

"Singin' on top of de Shoofly Chu'ch mought ca'm his mind," Hitch rumbled doubtfully. "But ef he hears singin' on top of dis house, it mought trouble his mind."

"Don't whisper so loud," Dazzle warned the men. "Ef de white folks ketch us up on dis roof dey'll kill us dead wid guns an' put us in jail."

"'Twon't be no worse dan spendin' de rest of our lives up on de top shelf of dis house," Pap Curtain retorted.

"'Tain't no reason fer us to set up on top of dis roof," Hitch Diamond growled. "Us might git sleepy an' roll off an' bu'st ourselves like a water-millyum. Less git down through de trap-door into de attic."

"Of co'se, dat's de idear!" Skeeter applauded.

"Vinegar ain't guarding but one side of dis house nohow. Us'll slip out on de yuther side an' go away from here."

He reached for the edge of the door and tried to lift it. It would not move. The latch on the other side of that door had held the door in place through Gulf storms which had snapped trees like toothpicks.

"Dis door is heavy, Hitch—git aholt!" Skeeter panted, straining at his task.

Four negro men promptly lent their aid and lifted, but they did not lift the door.

"My lawdymussy!" Hitch Diamond sighed with sudden enlightenment, as the cold, nervous sweat popped out on his forehead with the realization of their predicament. "I knows whut us is done. Dis dang door is got a ketch-lock on de inside, an' us is done locked ourselves out an' up on de roof!"

"Is you plum' shore, Hitchie?" Skeeter asked in a voice that was near to tears.

"I knows it," Hitch whispered. "Marse Tom sont me up here one time to look fer a leak in de roof, an' I locked myse'f out in jes' dis same way."

"How did you git rescued, Hitchie?" Skeeter asked tearfully.

"I hollered fer he'p till Marse Tom come up an' onlatched de door from de inside," Hitch told him.

"No fair hollerin' fer Marse Tom now," Skeeter said hopelessly. "We is all dead niggers."

"Mebbe ef we wait till day Vinegar will see us an' exoncise some sense—" Hopey began.

"Shut up, Hopey," Skeeter interrupted. "Ef we waits till dat nigger preacher gits sense, us'll be here till he dies fer he ain't never aimin' todes no sense. An' ef he looks up in de dawn's early light an' sees eight kinky heads peepin' at him over de edge of dis roof—he'll shoot, an' dar'll be eight blackbirds bakin' in a pie!"

"Lemme go take a peep at Revun Atts now, befo' day," Little Bit said, as he removed his shoes and began to crawl carefully through the darkness toward the edge of the roof. He was gone a long time, and the others waited his return in silence. At last he crawled back and said:

"I b'lieves dat Vinegar is asleep, brudders. It 'pears to me like he's layin' down flat, an' ef you listens real good I think us kin hear him snore."

"Dat don't he'p us none," Hitch Diamond grumbled. "Ef anything wakes him up, he'll be more skeart dan ever, an' he'll beller like a cow."

They sat down on the trap-door and waited a long time, each one trying to devise some plan of escape.

Finally, in desperation, Skeeter Butts removed his shoes and crawled to the edge of the roof.

"Hello, Revun!" he exclaimed in a low tone. But Vinegar's audible breathing was undisturbed by the birdlike voice.

"Hey, elder!" Skeeter hailed, getting louder.

Skeeter frightened himself by the courageous loudness of his voice, but Vinegar heard nothing to interrupt his dreams.

"Ho! Vinegar Atts!" Skeeter barked; and when he perceived no effect, he howled: "Hey, you ole fool nigger preacher, wake up! Git up!"

"Hush, Skeeter!" Mustard Prophet warned him. "You're hollerin' loud enough to wake up all de white folks in dis town, but it takes a real whoopful tone to wake a nigger. Don't fotch all de white folks up on us."

"How we gwine git dis old fool woked up?" Skeeter snapped.

"Take a brick off de top of de chimney an' throw it down at him," Little Bit suggested.

They wrenched off a brick and threw it. It hit the ground with a loud slap. Vinegar slept on.

"I knowed dat would be de come-out," Hitch grumbled. "Bricks won't wake up a nigger onless dey land on his head!"

"Whut we gwine do?" Skeeter wailed. "I never wus as tired roostin' on a roof in my life."

Nobody answered, and there was silence while all pondered the problem. The next suggestion came from Figger Bush.

"I read in a book about a man dat escaped out of jail by tyin' his clothes togedder an' makin' a rope. Mebbe ef we tear up our clothes an' make a rope an' let Little Bit down to de groun'——"

"Who—*me*? Little Bit demanded. "Naw!

But I'll he'p hold de rope while Hitch Diamond climbs down."

"I got de idear, niggers!" Pap Curtain put in. "Less set somepin on fire an' throw it down by de side of Vinegar. Dat'll wake him up all right, an' it'll gib a good light fer him to see his friends by."

"How come you didn't think of dat sooner, Pap?" Skeeter asked, as he removed his coat and began to pull off his shirt. "I contributes my shirt fer de blaze!"

Thereupon they tied Skeeter's shirt into a tight wad, struck a match, and set fire to it. When the blaze grew strong, they tossed it over the edge of the roof.

Their aim was good—too good. When Vinegar waked up he found the lawn glowing with light, and throwing fantastic shadows upon the sides of the house—shadows that resembled giant figures, figures which possessed hoof and wing and beak and claw and forked tail and leering looks and sneering mouths, all the malice of deformity. And he also saw that the rear portion of his swing-tail preaching coat was on fire!

Then he split the silence of the night with a cry which makes every nerve quiver whenever it is heard. Vinegar's voice had been trained for vociferation by years of exercise in calling for strayed hogs in the swamp, by preaching to somnolent negroes to whom his voice must carry through

slumberland, and by camp-meeting singing where sound took the place of symphony. That cry was louder than any human voice had ever uttered in Tickfall:

"Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r!"

Smothering the fire on the tail of his Prince Albert coat with his hands, Vinegar seized his automatic shotgun and fired six times in the air. Then he emptied two automatic pistols into the circumambient atmosphere, and above all the roar of his artillery he continued to bellow:

"Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r!"

The night watchman down in the town heard that cry and pulled a pistol from his pocket, firing six times in the air. Running into the courthouse, he pulled frantically at the bell-rope, and the wild clangor of the alarm reverberated through the empty streets. Then voices answered:

"Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r!"

IV

From their high perch on top of the house, the eight negroes could look down upon the entire village of Tickfall. Appalled by the unexpected outcome of their ruse, they were terrified beyond description as they beheld an entire village suddenly awake from slumber to most intense excitement and activity.

First, they saw the electric lights flash up in

every house in Tickfall. A moment later a large shaft of light flared across the darkness as a man opened a door, stepping out in front with shotgun or pistol. A moment later a number of quick flashes of light in front of each house and the sound of shots. It was thus that each man in the village sought to arouse his neighbors, the promiscuous shooting being a fire signal in all Louisiana villages.

Far over in the other end of the town the negroes beheld a great chimney belching glowing sparks from its top, and then from that station a siren-whistle sounded its weird screech, telling the inhabitants of Tickfall that the immense water-pumps were working and the fire-plugs were throbbing, waiting for the attachment of the hose.

In the center of the town two great lights began to whip the darkness, and another siren sounded, indicating that the gasoline fire-engine was leaving its station for its wild run up the hill to the Gaitskill home.

Then from all parts of the town came the honk of auto-horns and the racket of cars running with the muffler open; and the noise of running, shouting men hurrying to the scene, shooting firearms in the air; and the rattle of hose wagons and ladder trucks pulling the steep grade; while on top of the hill, standing on the Gaitskill lawn, was Vinegar Atts, negro preacher, Boanerges, son of thunder, bawling in a voice that would almost wake the dead:

“Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r!”

Eight negroes, squatting like monkeys on the top of Colonel Tom Gaitskill's house prayed to die. They didn't want to live another minute. They did not think it was worth while. They were in the helpless predicament of some man who has inadvertently started some powerful piece of machinery and does not know how to stop it. They had certainly started something. What the townful of fire-fighters would do to them when they caught them was something they did not care to think about. They preferred to die. If the chariot of the Lord would just swing low, there would be eight eager passengers swinging to the back step, waiting for the invitation: "Come up higher!"

The fire-engine stopped in front of the house; the ladder wagons thundered into the horse-lot on the side of the lawn; the multitude of fire-fighters came romping over the lawn; the hose was unwound screechingly and dragged to the nearest fire-plug.

Eight terror-stricken negroes lay flat on their stomachs on the roof moaning in anguish, pleading with de good Lawd to come an' git 'em now, befo' de white folks got to 'em fust, while Vinegar Atts, raving like a maniac, pranced up and down the lawn, bellowing like a bull of Bashan:

"Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r! Fie-ur-r!"

"Where is the fire?" a volunteer fireman screamed.

Vinegar gesticulated in the general direction of the Gaitskill homestead and whooped: "Fie-ur-r!"

"Shut up, you fool!" Sheriff Flournoy whooped, hitting Vinegar in the middle of the back with his fist, a blow like the kick of a mule. "Shut up that noise and show us the fire!"

Up to that moment it seemed to Vinegar Atts that the whole hillside was ablaze. He looked around with startled eyes. The Gaitskill home was in total darkness. Not a glow of fire anywhere that needed the aid of the fire department, for all the fires were those in the engine, the automobiles, and the cigarettes and cigars of the men. For the first time the thing looked to Vinegar like a false alarm. A number of men gathered around him, and he became frightened.

"Befo' Gawd, white folks," he stammered hoarsely, "dar wus a fire a little while ago, but I don't know whar-at it is now. It must hab went out."

"You went to sleep and dreamed it!" Flournoy snapped angrily.

"Naw, suh, I ain't been asleep at all!" Vinegar declared. "Of co'se, I napped a little early in de night, but I cain't really say I slept. An' I wus wid awake when de fire bu'st loose. I seen it wid my own eyes."

"What was burning?" Flournoy asked.

For a moment Vinegar could not recall. Then he remembered.

"Why, boss, my own coat-tail wus a burnin'! Look at it! All de swing-tail part of my Prancin' Albert coat is ruint—de lef' hind tail is plum' burnt off!"

One of the men backed Vinegar to where he could stand in front of an automobile light and inspected the rear of his preaching coat. Vinegar was right.

"What do you make of it, sheriff?" someone asked.

"Aw, I don't know," Flournoy said with disgust. "You can't get any sense out of this old fool."

"I's tellin' all I knows, Marse John," Vinegar said defensively. "Ef dar warn't no fire, how come my coat-tail is burnt off?"

"You may have burnt your coat-tail off three days ago, for all I know," Flournoy remarked.

"Naw, suh; dis coat-tail smells of fresh fire, Marse John," Vinegar protested. "Ef you don't b'lieve me, smell it yo'se'f!"

"You listen to me, Vinegar Atts," Flournoy said angrily. "I'm going to search this house and these premises for a fire, and if I don't find one I'm going to kick that burnt coat-tail of yours clear down the hill to the jail, and I'll put you in there for forty years for disturbing the peace! Understand?"

He turned and walked to the house, stopping on the porch.

"Listen to me, everybody!" his authoritative voice commanded. "I am going to search this

house for fire. You men search all the stables and outhouses."

Vinegar's hand reached back gingerly in the vicinity of his coat-tail. That portion of his anatomy was a particularly soft and tender spot on him. He decided not to wait for the sheriff to escort him to jail on the toe of his official boot. Marse John could be powerful rough with cullud folks if he wanted to be, and now he appeared to be mad about something. Vinegar started down the hill toward the jail on his own volition; he went straight to the jail, but he didn't stop there. He went on, and he kept going three days.

Eight negroes had heard the sheriff's announcement that he was going to search the house, and they crouched upon the roof with terror and despair in their hearts. They knew the white man would look for fire on the roof!

"Dar ain't no hope now, niggers," Pap Curtain moaned. "Us mought as well jump off dis roof on our heads."

"Mebbe Marse John won't come up on dis roof," Little Bit remarked hopefully.

"Dat white man don't never leave nothin' on-done, Little Bit," Skeeter sighed mournfully. "He'll be up on dis roof jes' as shore as dar is a top to dis ole house."

"Yep, he's comin'," Hitch Diamond rumbled. "I wish I wus de tail of a buzzard—I'd hab some chance to fly off from here."

"Be still, folks; be still an' lemme think!" Skeeter Butts exclaimed, seating himself on the trap-door and clawing at his head with both hands. "Mebbe I kin pull somepin off!"

"I wish somepin would pull me offen dis roof!" Mustard retorted.

While the search continued in the yard below, Skeeter sat and thought. Not a place where a spark of fire might linger was left uninspected in the yard, the outhouses, or the corners of the fence. Within the house, Flournoy was just as particular and minute in his search. First the entire lower floor was subjected to the closest inspection. Then he moved up the steps and searched in every room and closet. Then he moved up a third flight of steps, and stood looking at the contents of the attic, the accumulation of cast-off stuff of years, sniffing for the odor of smoke, glaring in the darkness for the smallest gleam of fire.

He knew that house through associations which carried him back to his earliest childhood. With his electric flash-light he found the ladder in the attic which led up to the roof. He remembered climbing that ladder, or a ladder like that, fifty years before for a boyish view of the world from that high point.

Slowly he climbed upward until his groping hands touched the trap-door above his head.

Skeeter Butts suddenly rose from his seat upon

the trap-door, belled his hands around his mouth, and said in a loud whisper:

"Lay down flat on de roof, niggers, an' say yo' prayers! Lay down an' be still ef you wants to save you lives!"

Then the trap-door was slowly raised about a foot. Skeeter stepped upon the door with his full weight and mashed it back into its place.

"Who is up on that roof?" Flournoy asked in a voice which cracked like a pistol shot.

"By gosh, Marse John!" Skeeter squalled. "You mighty nigh skeart de gizzard out of me. I thought a ha'nt was tryin' to lift dat door!"

At the sound of Skeeter's voice Flournoy laughed. In the many years that Skeeter had been his "pet nigger," his "favorite insect," Flournoy had found him in so many unexpected places that he had ceased to be surprised.

"What are you doing up on this roof?" Flournoy asked, pushing up the trap-door and looking at Skeeter's outline in the dark.

"I climbed up to look fer fire on de roof, Marse John," Skeeter said, artfully blocking the door with his foot so that the sheriff could not easily raise it higher. "Dis roof is powerful slick, Marse John. You better not climb out. Dar ain't no fire up here nohow!"

"Come on then; let's go down," the sheriff answered, backing down the ladder.

Skeeter followed willingly, latching the trap-door securely behind him as he descended.

At the foot of the ladder, the sheriff turned his flash-light into Skeeter's face.

"Where's your shirt, Skeeter?" he asked.

"I didn't take no time to put on no shirt, Marse John," Skeeter chuckled. "When I heard de kunnel's house wus on fire, I jes' nachelly abandoned all de clothes I didn't need."

"That was right," Flournoy approved. "You're a white nigger!"

V

By the time Flournoy and Skeeter had reached the ground, the volunteer firemen had grown weary and gone home. The engines, hose-wagon, ladder-trucks, automobiles, all had gone home.

"I'll leave you here for the rest of the night, Skeeter," Flournoy remarked as he turned his flash upon his watch to see the time. "I think Vinegar Atts must have delirium tremens, or something like that."

"He didn't git 'em at de Hen-Scratch, Marse John," Skeeter said earnestly. "He buys all his drinks on credick, an' I holds him down till he's mighty nigh teetotal prohibitionist."

"You mean that you are the prohibitionist and he is of necessity the almost total abstainer."

The Fraid Cat

"Yes, suh, it's jes' as much dat way as it is de way I said it."

Half an hour later Skeeter sneaked up the steps, unlatched the trap-door, and pushed it open. Seven negroes were standing with anxious faces at the opening, and they welcomed Skeeter with exclamations of thanksgiving which sounded like a Shoofly prayer and praise service.

One by one they climbed down the ladder, then marched in single file to the kitchen.

Skeeter switched on the electric light, and the eight idiots stood about in dejected attitudes, sleepy, winking at the light, worn with excitement and fatigue, depressed by their frightful experiences.

Pap Curtain was a man of age and discretion; he had had various legal experiences which had put a special emphasis for him upon the motto: "Safety First."

He looked his seven companions in evil over very searchingly, then turned to them with these words:

"You niggers cross yo' heart an' body!"

They made the sign.

"Repeat dese here words atter me," Pap snarled. Then the words came in short phrases, easy to repeat: "I solemnly swears on de Bible an' all de opossums dat I won't say nothin' about de doin's of dis night, now an' ferever, amen. An' ef I does, I hopes I may die!"

"An' ef anybody blabs, I'll be de nigger dat'll cause yo' onhappy end!" Pap warned them menacingly.

"Suppose de white folks ax questions?" Little Bit inquired.

"Dat's easy," Pap replied with a sneering grin. "Tell eve'ybody dat axes you dat all us niggers thinks Marse Tom Gaitskill ole house is ha'nted. Dat'll be aplenty to say to white folks."

Dazzle Zenor walked over and put her arms around Skeeter Butts.

"You is a brave cullud man, Skeeter," she told him. "I loves you."

Skeeter disengaged her arms and pushed her away.

"Wus you lyin' to me when you telerphomed dat robbers wus in dis house?" he asked.

"Naw, suh, I wus jokin'. I wanted to see wus you brave enough to come an' rescue me—an' you wus, Skeeter, an' I loves you mo' dan ever."

But Skeeter evaded her outstretched arms as she advanced again for a clinch, and with a contemptuous wave of his yellow hand he delivered this good-night message:

"Git away! You done made me burn up a shirt an' waste a good night's sleep. Dat's plum' plenty fer you! I'm always a brave nigger!"

Then eight negroes uttered a low moan of fright. The electric light had gone out, leaving them in darkness in that haunted house!

The electric lights went out every night at one o'clock, but they didn't think of that.

Eight negroes left that kitchen in a hurry. They sped away in eight different directions, at various speeds, each according to his capability. But everyone did his best, each chased by a "ha'nt"—for thus doth conscience make cowards of us all

The Consolation Prize

I

THE CLOUD ON THE HORIZON

"SKEETER, kin you rickoleck in your mind about a nigger man who called hisse'f Wash Jones?"

"Suttinly," Skeeter answered. "He snuck in here about a year ago an' tried to refawm Tickfall cullud sawciety. Us made him Fust Grand Organizer of de Nights of Darkness Lodge fer de whole worl' an' sont him out of town on his fust gran' organize. Ain't seed him since dat time."

"He's done snuck in agin," Figger informed him. "He's all here—de same flossy vest an' de same big watch-chain 'thout no watch to it, an' 'de same mouthful of chawin' terbacker. But his mouth is done changed."

"Whut done happened to his mouth?"

"He's growed two long mustaches whut comes down de sides of his nose plum' below his chin. He looks like a nigger whut had swallowed two cat-squirrels an' lef' deir tails hangin' out!"

"Whut you reckon he done dat fer?" Skeeter asked.

"Done disguised hisse'f."

"He ain't refawmin' nothin', is he?" Skeeter asked uneasily.

"Naw, suh. He's organizin'. He done throwed up his Nights of Darkness Lodge job an' is conductin' health resorts fer cullud pussons."

"Dar ain't no sick niggers in Tickfall," Skeeter said with relief. "He's done busted in bizziness an' don't know it."

"Dar ain't no real sick niggers," Figger agreed. "But plenty of us feels jes' tol'able an' b'lieves dat we needs a rest."

"Restin' time an' Sunday comes nachel wid niggers," Skeeter grinned. "You ain't sweeped out dis saloon fer about six mont's."

"Cain't sweep her out now, Skeeter," Figger replied hastily. "Fer a fack, I done come to ax you fer a lay-off fer about two weeks. I needs a change."

"Wharabouts you gwine change to?" Skeeter asked grouchily.

"Out to de ole tabernacle an' de prize-fight, picnic, baseball-groun's, whar Brudder Wash is organizin' his health resort."

"How come I ain't heerd tell 'bout dat?" Skeeter asked.

"He's been keepin' it sly because he wus skeart somebody else would think it up an' beat him to it," Figger explained. "He done leased de ole camp-groun's complete, fixed up all de little shacks

whar niggers kin stay, hired Shin Bone to run de reteraw, made a dancin'-floor in de ole tabernacle, rented a brass band, an' is gittin' ready to rake in de dollars."

"My Lawd!" Skeeter exclaimed in dismay. "I been livin' in dis town all my days an' I never thunk of dat gorgeous idear in my whole life."

"It shore is a dandy notion," Figger said with admiration. "Dar's fo' springs of water, a great big lake to fish an' swim in, plenty woods an' playgroun's."

"Gosh! Jes' think of de money dat's gwine miss my pants' pocket," Skeeter sighed.

"Wash specifies dat dar is a Cooney Island in New Yawk an' he's gwine hab a Coon Island in Tickfall."

"Dat shore is put somepin over on me," Skeeter mourned.

"Ef you ain't got no real good objections, I goes out dar to-night an' stays a week," Figger remarked.

"I don't like de notion of keepin' dis saloon while you gallivants off to a nigger frolic," Skeeter protested.

"But I gotter go," Figger assured him.

"Nobody ain't gotter go no place onless he wants to, excusin' jail," Skeeter grumbled.

Figger Bush ended the argument by rising from the table, knocking the ashes from his pipe, and retiring to a little room in the rear of the bar to

dress. Ten minutes later he came out with a new suit of clothes, a sunburst tie, a high collar and most expansive cuffs, and all the other paraphernalia of a dead-game sport out for a vacation.

"I hates to leave you, Skeeter," Figger remarked apologetically. "I's sorry you is got a grouch. But ef I don't show up at de tabernacle my grand-paw won't like it."

"How come you is so suddent oneasy about displeasin' Popsy Spout?" Skeeter wanted to know.

"Dat ole man is got money in de bank. Some day he's gwine haul off an' die. When he do, he'll inherit me his house an' all his cash spondulix. Atter dat happens, I'll buy one-half of dis Hen-Scratch saloon."

"Dat ole gizzard says he's gwine live till he's one hundred year ole," Skeeter reminded him.

"Dat means you got to wait thirty year fer yo' money."

"Mebbe he's done miscalculated 'bout how long he's gwine hang on de bush," Figger grinned. "I been pussuadin' him to take a little swim in de Cooley Lake eve'y atternoon when we gits out dar, an' you know dar's allergaters in dat lake whut kin swaller Joner an' de whale."

"Ef a allergater swallowed Popsy, he'd treat him jes' like de whale done Joner—he'd git dat nigger off his stomick as soon as he could," Skeeter growled.

"'Tain't so, Skeeter," Figger argued earnestly.

"When one of dese here Loozanny allergaters swallers a nigger, he crawls out on a mud-bank an' goes to sleep an' fergits all about dat cullud pusson in his midst."

"Ef I could git my wish, I'd be glad if one dem things would chaw up you an' Popsy, too," Skeeter retorted.

Figger sat down and lighted a cigarette, wondering how he could placate Skeeter for leaving him alone with the saloon. He could think of nothing else to say, so he changed the theme a little:

"Whut bothers my mind a little, Skeeter, is de fack dat Popsy ain't got no real good notion whut kind of doin's will be at de tabernacle. He remembers how 'twus befo' de war when de white folks helt religium-meetin's out dar. He wants me to go an' attend de religium services so me an' Scootie will git gooder dan we are."

Skeeter brightened up and laughed.

"Dat means de joke is on you an' Scootie, Figger," he guffawed. "I'd druther hab de seben-year itch wid nothin' to scratch wid—I'd druther be a drag-log tied to a houn'-dawg—dan listen to dat ole Popsy fussin' 'bout how good things useter wus an' how much wusser things is now. Go to it, Figger! You got my permission fer a week's leave-off."

"I been tellin' you I warn't so awful anxious to go," Figger reminded him.

"You ain't 'pressed dat fack on my mind very hard, Skeeter replied. "I wants you to come in eve'y mawnin' an' barkeep. You kin go out an' enjoy Popsy at night."

"I'll be in to-morrer mawnin' early," Figger answered, as he left.

But Figger did not appear in the saloon until the next day at noon. Skeeter had spent the time thinking up some especially cutting things to say to his partner, but Figger entered the place like a personified calamity and Skeeter forgot all his unkind words in an intense curiosity to know what had happened.

"I done run up on somepin awful bad, Skeeter," Figger groaned. "Pap Curtain is fixin' to start a saloon."

"My Lawd!" Skeeter exclaimed. "De Hen-Scratch has been de onliest cullud saloon in Tick-fall fer twenty year. Now dis here Pap Curtain is aimin' to rival us out of bizzness."

"Dat's de way de rabbit p'int's his nose," Figger assured him.

"Whar do he git de money?" Skeeter asked.

"He's makin' arrangements to marrify it," Figger wailed. "Dar's a great big ole cow of a woman out dar whut owns five hundred dollars. Her paw an' maw is talkin' it aroun' an' dey's huntin' somebody dat'll marry her fer her money."

"Is she as bad lookin' as all dat?"

"Shore is. She looks like a puddin' dat riz too

high an' spreads out too much. She kinder comes outen her clothes an' rolls over de edges of a chair an' de big of her 'pears like it's boilin' over all de sides all de time."

"I ketch on," Skeeter grinned. "She jes' out-niggers herse'f by bein' so fat."

"Pap'll take her ef he kin git her," Figger sighed. "He ain't pertickler. He wants money to start a saloon."

"Us'll bofe close up dis saloon to-night an' go out an' take a look on," Skeeter announced. "Dis town kin do without two nigger saloons. One is a plum' plenty. Who is dis here nigger woman anyhow?"

"She's ole Isaiah Gaitskill's stepchile," Figger informed him. "She takes atter her maw in fat-hood. She's a widder woman an' her deceasted husbunt left her a lot of insurance dollars."

"Gosh!" Skeeter sighed in desperation. "Pap Curtain an' a widder woman! Two ag'in' one—I ain't got no show. Life ain't fitten to live no more."

II

PLEASURE AND PROFIT

In the evening Skeeter Butts followed Figger out to the old tabernacle grounds and was amazed at the transformation of the place.

Wash Jones had moved many of the benches out

of the building and had placed them under trees and in the groves. He had made sawdust trails from the tabernacle to the edge of the lake, to the Shin Bone eating-house, and to all other places where a little money could be coaxed from the pocket of the pleasure-seeker.

He had made a dancing-floor in a part of the tabernacle, arranging seats around it for the sight-seers. He had erected refreshment-booths in other portions of the building, and also a band-stand, where the sweating, hard-worked black Tickfall brass band was having the most hilarious time of their lives.

Negroes had come in from the plantations for miles around. Horses were tied to all the trees, wagons and buggies were sheltered in the woods, and a great mob of folks moved up and down the sawdust avenues or tramped the woods, shouting, laughing, cutting monkey-shines, and eating popcorn balls, hot dogs, and sandwiches made of fried catfish.

It was a noisy, boisterous, rollicking place which Skeeter entered.

Ordinarily Skeeter would have been the center of the whole thing. But this affair had slipped up on him and had suddenly developed business complications and his mind was too occupied with his troubles to enjoy the fun going on around him.

Soon after entering the grounds he found Pap

Curtain. Pap was entertaining himself by paying five cents for three baseballs. He would then try to throw each ball so it would stay in a bucket about twenty feet away. Whenever he placed one to stay, the proprietor of the amusement feature would give Pap a cigar. The cigars sold three for a nickel in Tickfall and as Pap never succeeded in placing more than two balls in the bucket, the proprietor of the place always made a fair profit in the transaction. Pap had his pocket stuffed full of cheap cigars and promptly offered a handful to Skeeter.

"I don't smoke garbage," Skeeter said impatiently, waving aside the offer.

"I figger I done acquired enough of dese cabbage-leaves. Less move on an' git some fun somewhere else."

A short distance down the sawdust trail they ran into something new. The diminutive darky named Little Bit was standing on a frail platform erected over a hogshhead full of water. There was a trigger shaped like a skiff-paddle about fifty feet away, and men were throwing baseballs at this paddle. If someone hit the trigger, the platform, on which Little Bit was standing, fell and ducked the diminutive darky in the hogshhead of water. Little Bit was well known in Tickfall and this particular attraction was a riot. Sometimes thirty baseballs would be flying toward that paddle-shaped trigger at one time, and the hapless Little

Bit spent more time in the hogshhead of water than he did on the platform.

"Lawd, Skeeter!" Pap exclaimed when he had laughed himself nearly to exhaustion. "I'd druther be de owner of dis Coon Island dan de' pres'dunt of de Europe war. I feels like I's jes' nachelly cut out fer a job like dis. I been huntin' fer somepin I been fitten fer all my life an' dis am it."

"I wish you had dis job, Pap," Skeeter replied. "I stopped by to ax you a question."

"I'll answer yes or no, like de gram jury always tells me to do," Pap grinned.

"Word is done been sont to me dat you is fixin' to start a saloon. Is dat so?"

"Yep."

"Whar you gwine git de money at?"

"A fat widder woman's husbunt is kicked de bucket an' lef' her a wad of dough," Pap chuckled. "I's gwine marrify de widder, mix dat dough wid my brains an' start me a place of bizzness."

"I thought you wus done through wid marrin' womens," Skeeter wailed. "You done been kotched fo' times already."

"Yas, suh, but in all dem fo' times I never married no widder. My edgycation is been neglected. Dey wus all young an' foolish gals. Dis here is a sottled woman—so dang fat dat when she sottles down it takes a block an' tackle to h'ist her agin."

"Aw, shuckins!" Skeeter exclaimed. "Whut you marryin' dat kind of gal fer?"

"Fer five hundred dollars!" Pap said.

Skeeter turned away with a troubled face. Pap looked after him a moment, then purchased three more baseballs to throw at the trigger-paddle.

At the far end of the grounds, Skeeter found Wash Jones.

"Wash," he said after a little conversation, "I understands dat you is got a prize widder in dis show."

The big black eyed Skeeter for a moment with suspicion. He took the time to help himself to a big chew of tobacco before he answered, watching Skeeter covertly all the time. At last he said:

"I ain't heerd tell about dat. But I ain't surprised none. I got all de attractshuns on dis Coon Island whut is."

"Dey tells me dis widder is got a dead husbunt an' five hundred dollars," Skeeter continued.

Wash dropped his plug of tobacco and stooped to pick it up. That Skeeter had this information was not a surprise to him; it was a shock.

"Who mought dat widder be?" Wash asked.

"Sister Solly Skaggs," Skeeter informed him.

"I knows her," Wash groaned. "Fat—O Lawd! Ef dat gal wuster drap dead, dey'd hab to git a mud-scow outen de river fer a coffin, an' de only hole in de groun' big enough to put her in is Marse Tom's sand pit. Dat five hundred dollars don't

int'rust my mind, naw, suh, not at all, not at all!"

"Don't waste no time thinkin' about it," Skeeter sighed. "Pap Curtain is done spoke fer it—de fat's in de fire."

"Which?" Wash Jones exclaimed in a tone that popped like a gun. "Pap Curtain?"

"Pap done pulled de curtain down on de widder," Skeeter assured him. "Nobody else needn't look at her charms."

Wash Jones turned around three times, as if looking for some place to go and practically undecided about what direction to choose.

Skeeter wandered on disconsolately and finally found himself beside the old tabernacle. An aged man approached him. Skeeter looked for a place to escape, but found no avenue of exit and stood his ground. The venerable man was Popsy Spout.

"I don't ketch on 'bout dis, Skeeter," he said in the high, shrill complaining voice of senility. "Dis here ain't de place whut I thought it wus. 'Tain't de same place whut it uster be befo' an' endurin' of de war. When do de religium exoncises begin?"

"I dunno," Skeeter answered. "Ax Wash Jones."

"I axed him. Wash said ef de people wanted religium doin's dey could start 'em deyselves," Popsy whined. "Wash said he wus jes' de servunt of de people fer so much money per each people."

"Dat's right," Skeeter laughed.

"I thought dey wus gwine hab preachin' in dat

ole tabernacle to-night," Pap complained. "Instid of dat, dey's gwine had a dance fer a prize! Yas, suh—whut do Gawd think of dat? A dance fer a prize?"

"I hopes dat Pap Curtain slips up an' breaks bofe behime legs," Skeeter remarked bitterly.

"'Tain't no use hopin'," the old man chuckled. "Pap is like me—sprit on his legs fer a ole man. But Pap an' me don't favor dancin'. We been talkin' it over. I deespise a nigger dat dances. Ef any of my kin-folks cuts a shuffle on dat flo' dis night, dey ain't no kinnery of mine no more."

"I 'speck I better go gib Figger a warnin' right now," Skeeter exclaimed eagerly, glad to find a reason for departure.

"Dat's right!" Popsy exclaimed, in his high, cracked falsetto. "You warn him good!"

Skeeter wandered down to the shore of the little lake and sat down alone to think out some method of defeating Pap's designs. After an hour Figger Bush found him by the glow of his cigarette, and came and sat beside him.

"De only way to bust Pap's plans, Figger, is to marry dat fat Solly Skaggs to somebody else."

"Who'll take her?" Figger inquired.

"It'll hab to be somebody dat ain't married already," Skeeter said.

"You's de only onmarried man I knows, excusin' Pap," Figger giggled. "I guess you'll hab to make de riffle."

Skeeter considered this a moment in silence. Then he asked:

"Is she so awful fat as people says she is?"

"Ain't you never seed her?" Figger exclaimed. "Honey, de half ain't never yit been told! She's been reg'lar to her meals ever since she wus borned, an' her meals is been frequent an' copious, an' her vittles is agreed wid her too well! Come on, Skeeter, lemme interjuice you to yo' future wife!"

Figger rose to his feet with eagerness. Skeeter shook his head and sighed.

"I wouldn't choose any, Figger. I'd druther Pap Curtain would rival me out of bizzness."

"Mebbe we could wish her onto somebody else," Figger proposed.

"I been tryin' to think up some onmarried man," Skeeter told him, "but I don't see none in sight."

They smoked for an hour longer without producing a spark of an idea. At last Skeeter said:

"All I kin do jes' now, Figger, is to keep Pap away from dat gal until I finds a fitten secont husbunt fer her. Dar's gwine be a prize dance to-night an' I nominates you to dance wid Sister Solly Skaggs."

"Ef she trods on me I'll be a squashed worm of de dust," Figger wailed.

"Don't talk back," Skeeter replied sharply. "I'll fix it so you an' Sister Solly win de prize."

III

“DAT FAT, FLOUNDERIN’ FOOL”

Mrs. Solly Skaggs was a widow of the sod variety and had enjoyed her matrimonial release for about six months. She had not mourned too much for Solly nor had she loved him much. For he was about as lovable as a sick dog and his departure from the world was a distinct blessing to all the inhabitants thereof.

Old Isaiah Gaitskill, in discussing her chances for matrimony again, assured her that no negro would marry her because she was too fat. But this did not discourage the lady and there was no indication of despair either in her manner or her deportment, for she dressed and acted like a miss of sweet sixteen.

Old Popsy Spout stood on the edge of the throng and watched her elephantine performances on the dancing-floor. Growing weary, he walked over and sat down upon a bench beside Pap Curtain.

“Look at dat fool nigger gal, Pap,” he whined. “I been livin’ off and on nigh onto one hundred year an’ I done seen plenty sights, but dat fat fool flounderin’ on dat floor is de wust sight till yit.”

“Don’t preach so loud, Popsy,” Pap said with a warning hiss. “You mought hurt dat cullud lady’s feelin’s.”

"I ain't preachin'," Popsy snapped. "I's tellin' facks. Excusin' dat, she ain't got no feelin's. Her feelin's is padded two-foot deep in fat. I bet she's got some age on her, too."

"Not too much age fer a widder," Pap said. "An' she's wuth consid'able money since her fust husbunt up an' died on her. Five hundred dollars will keep dat woman fat fer a long time."

"Why don't you git in de race, Pap?" Popsy suggested. "You ain't got no wife now."

"Dat's my bizzness right now," Pap grinned. "I needs a little cash money to start a saloon."

"You ain't figgerin' to buy out Figger an' Skeeter in de Hen-Scratch, is you?" Popsy asked.

"Naw, suh, I's fixin' to run 'em out," Pap said confidently, as he arose and walked away.

Popsy arose, too, pushed his way through the crowd and went in search of Figger Bush. He found Figger and his wife and Skeeter Butts in the Shin Bone eating-house. He hastened to their table, rested his rusty stove-pipe hat upon the top of the table and sat down.

"How come you an' Skeeter is bofe lef' yo' bizzness to come out here, Figger?" he inquired.

"Dar ain't no bizzness wid dis frolic gwine on," Figger said.

"You better git to wuckin' up some new bizzness," the old man remarked. "Pap Curtain is jes' tole me he wus gwine run you-alls out."

"We been talkin' about dat," Skeeter broke in.

"Pap's tryin' to pick a widder an' us is wonderin' how we kin bump him off de job."

"I's gittin' to be a awful ole fool," Popsy sighed. "I jes' dis minute suggested to Pap dat he ought to marry dat widder an' git her out of her misery an' her mournin'."

"Whut you mean by doin' dat, Popsy?" Skeeter snapped. "You done ruint us. I's thinkin' about firin' Figger now because our bizzness is got so bum wid prohibition an' all dem yuther troubles."

"Mebbe I could go back an' tell Pap he is makin' a miscue at his age," Popsy proposed.

"You better go do somepin," Skeeter snapped. "You go potterin' aroun' an' spile my trade an' I'll kick Figger out an' you'll hab dis here wuthless nigger to suppote."

"Not ef I kin he'p it," Popsy said positively. "I'll shore git busy an' c'reck dat mistake. I needs my dollars fer my own use. I's fixin' to spend 'em in my ole age, when I gits ole."

At this moment Wash Jones stepped to the middle of the floor, pulled proudly at one of his squirrel-tail mustaches, knocked upon a dining-table with the nicked edge of a thick, granite saucer, and commanded silence.

"I announces dar will be a prize dance at de tabernacle to-night. It will be de last dance of de evenin'. Five cents lets you into de tabernacle to perceive de dancers, ten cents will gib you de

right to dance. At de end of de last dance a prize will be gib away to de lucky winner. De show begins at ten o'clock."

"I's reckon I'll hab to trod 'em a few," Skeeter sighed. "Got to do somepin to ease up my mind."

"I don't allow Scootie an' Figger to dance," Popsy snapped. "'Tain't decent an' religium to cut monkey-shines like dat at a camp-meetin'. Married folks oughter sottle down an' behave."

"I agree wid you," Skeeter grinned, winking at Figger Bush. "Bofe of 'em is gittin' too ole an' stiff to dance an' Figger never wus no account dancer nohow. As fer Scootie, she dances like one dese here Teddy bears."

"'Tain't so," Scootie snapped. "You gimme a couple dances wid you to-night an' I'll show you—*ouch!*"

Figger kicked Scootie under the table and pounded on the top of the table with his fist to drown her voice, looking fearfully the while at Popsy Spout to see if he was listening to her remarks.

"Shut up!" he hissed. "Whut you want to be such a splatter-jaw fer? Watch whut you's sayin'!"

Scootie cast a frightened look at Popsy, but the old man showed by his next question that he had not noticed her break.

"Whut kind prizes does dey gib fer de dance, Skeeter?"

"Nobody ain't know but Wash Jones," Skeeter

informed him. "Dis is de fust night of de show an' no prizes ain't git bestowed yit."

"'Twon't be nothin' but a pack of chawgum fer de lady an' a box of cigareets fer de man," Figger said disgustedly. "Wash Jones ain't gwine gib nothin' away. I think I'll cut out de dance an' go to bed."

"Me, too," Popsy whined. "I got a little bed out here in one of dese shacks ef I could find it."

"It's down by de lake, Popsy," Figger told him, glad that Popsy was leaving them. "You won't hab no trouble gittin' dar."

As soon as Popsy had departed, Scootie turned to Figger and snapped:

"You mighty nigh kicked my leg off an' ole Popsy didn't pay no mind to whut I wus sayin' at all."

"Stop talkin' 'bout dancin' whar Popsy is," Figger growled. "Dat ole man will git mad an' gib all his money to furin missionaries when he dies."

"You's makin' yo'se'f tired fer nothin', Figger," Skeeter giggled. "Popsy will find out about yo' dancin' powerful soon."

"How soon?" Figger asked.

"As soon as you an' Sister Skaggs wins dem prizes to-night."

"I ain't gwine win no prize. Dar cain't be no prize-dancin' wid dat fat ole cow. De judges would laugh at us."

"I'll fix de judges," Skeeter laughed. "Leave it wid me an' Wash Jones."

"You ain't fixin' to buy up de judges, is you?" Figger asked.

"Naw. I's fixin' to buy Wash Jones. 'Twon't cost much. Wash is a cheap nigger."

IV

THE JOYOUS TROUBLE-MAKERS

Wash Jones was standing behind the tabernacle, mopping the copious perspiration that streamed from his baboon face.

"I finds dis here bizzness a heap more wuck dan I bargained fer," he complained to Skeeter Butts. "When I fust started out I thought dat niggers would jes' entertain deyselves an' not expeck nothin' from me but de pleasure of my comp'ny. But I finds dat dey expecks me to be on de job of waitin' on 'em all de time."

"Suttinly," Skeeter snickered. "Ef I charged admissions to my saloon I wouldn't allow no niggers to wait on demselves. I'd hab to serve 'em."

"I done collected all de admission-fares I expecks to git," Wash sighed, fanning himself with his big hat. "As fer as I'm concerned, dis here show kin end right now."

"Ef you end her up now de people will kick an' want deir money back," Skeeter reminded

him. "You done collected up fer a week in eegsvance."

"I'd be powerful glad to turn de job over to some yuther feller fer whut he kin make out of it, ef I had a good excuse fer hittin' de grit out of here," Wash suggested.

"I ain't candidatin' fer de place," Skeeter chuckled. "But I kin show you how you kin make a few more easy dollars ef you ain't keer too much how you got 'em."

"Spill de beans right here, Skeeter," Wash answered earnestly. "Dat sounds good to me."

"My trouble am dis," Skeeter began. "You is givin' a prize-dance to-night an' I wants to pick de winner."

"I'll app'int you one of de judges fer one dollar," Wash said promptly.

"Dat won't he'p none," Skeeter said. "Dat'll jes' git one vote."

"I'll be a judge myse'f an' dat'll gib you two votes—dat is, ef you is willin' to bestow anodder dollar fer my vote."

"Who will de yuther judge be?"

"Ef you gib me anodder dollar I'll let you name him yo'se'f," Wash replied without hesitation. "Pick yo' own nigger an' trade wid him pussonly fer his pussonal vote."

"Here's three dollars, Wash," Skeeter chuckled as he rattled the money in his hand. "You shore is a easy nigger to trade wid."

"Jes' ile my machinery aplenty an' I'll run along smooth," Wash grinned as he pocketed the money. "Who is de couple you wants to win dis prize-dance?"

"Figger Bush an' Sister Solly Skaggs."

"Gosh!" Wash Jones exploded as he thrust his hand into his pocket, brought out the three dollars and handed them back to Skeeter. "I loves money but I ain't troublin' trouble."

"Whut ails dem plans?" Skeeter asked, thrusting back the hand which offered him the money.

"In de fust place, Sister Solly Skaggs can't win a prize in no kind of dance whutsoever. She cain't dance no more dan a Mefdis meetin'-house. In de secont place it's a little too raw fer you to be de judge of a dance an' gib de prize to yo' own pardner in de saloon bizzness."

"I sees de light," Skeeter said in a surprised tone. "I suttinly did mighty nigh slip up on dat plan. Wonder whut we kin do to he'p you earn dat money an' still act honest?"

"Dat question is 'most too heavy fer my mind," Wash said indifferently. "I'll keep dis three dollars an' let you think up yo' own plan. Ef it don't wuck, I'll gib you yo' money back."

"Whut kind of prizes is you gwine gib, Wash?" Skeeter asked.

"Whutever kind of prizes you wants to buy," Wash grinned. "I leaves it wid you to pick 'em an' pay fer 'em."

"I thought you had 'em already selected!" Skeeter exclaimed.

"Naw, suh, I figgered it out dat some nigger would want hisse'f an' his gal to win dem prizes so I wus waitin' fer him to bestow a little money on me an' furnish de prizes outen his own cash money."

"You shore is a skillful nigger, Wash," Skeeter said admiringly. "I oughter run wid you a little while an' git some new notions in my head. You knows how to rob 'em widout gittin' in jail."

"You better git some notions in yo' head 'bout dem prizes," Wash warned him. "Dat dance is startin' off pretty soon."

"'Tain't no trouble to select de prizes," Skeeter laughed. "I'll git Sister Skaggs a little round lookin'-glass 'bout big enough fer her to see her nose in; an I'll git Figger a nickel-plated cigareet holder."

"Cigareet holders comes pretty high, don't dey?"

"Yes, suh, but I don't mind payin' fer one. I been needin' one dem things fer a long time an I'll make Figger gib it back to me."

"Dat shows I ain't de only nigger wid notions," Wash laughed. "Dat's a real good trick. Is you got it mapped out how you will git de prize to dem two dancers?"

"Dat ain't no trouble."

"I hopes it won't make no trouble," Wash remarked.

"Not at all!" Skeeter assured him. "You will be de onliest judge. Write de names of each couple on a card an' put all de cards in a bag. When de times comes to gib de prizes, shake de bag up, put in yo' hand an' fotch out de card wid de names of de winners."

"How'll I git holt of de card wid Figger's name on it when it's shuck up in a bag?" Wash wanted to know.

"Take a pin an' pin Figger's card to de bottom of de bag on de inside," Skeeter explained. "All you got to do atter dat is to reach down an' onpin dat card an' fotch it out."

Wash looked at Skeeter with the utmost admiration.

"Brudder Butts," he said earnestly, "some day I'll take a notion to rob a rattlesnake of de skin under its chin. When I git ready to do it I'll plan a little wid you an' learn how to do it."

"Dat wus easy," Skeeter grinned. "I kin always think up plenty good plans fer de yuther feller. I falls down when I begins to study fer myse'f."

"How come you wants dese two to win so bad?" Wash asked.

"I's tryin' to break Pap Curtain's nose!" Skeeter exclaimed. "He's atter de fat widder an' her easy money. He aims to start a saloon, an' I's de leader of de highest alcoholic circles in dis town an' don't need no competition."

"Nachelly you is ag'in' dat," Wash said promptly. "Mebbe ef you could loant me twenty dollars I could think up some good plan to he'p you out."

Skeeter produced two ten-dollar bills.

"Jes' keep Pap away from Sister Skaggs, Wash," Skeeter said earnestly. "Dat earns dis money. I think Pap is got a sure thing. He's de only on-married nigger in Tickfall, an' de widder will take anybody she kin git. She ain't choosy or she wouldn't never choose Pap."

"I makes you one promise fer dis twenty, Skeeter," Wash said. "Pap won't start no saloon in Tickfall. As fer marryin' de widder, I cain't promise dat he won't. Not even Gawd knows whut kind of man a widder is gwine to marry."

V

AN UNFORESEEN COMPETITOR

The one negro in Tickfall who never dressed up was Pap Curtain. He was the well-digger and the grave-digger of that community, and he carried the marks of his trade upon him, clay on his clothes, on his hands, on his hat. But to-night for the first time in the memory of men, Pap was arrayed in gorgeous garments. He attracted much attention.

"Whoo-pee, Pap!" Vinegar Atts bellowed. "I

cain't make up my mind whether you is a young nigger beginnin' to show yo' age, or a ole nigger tryin' to look lesser dan yo' real age."

"I done heerd remarks like dat a plum' plenty, Revun," Pap snarled. "I admits dat I's gwine on seventy odd year ole."

"I didn't say you wusn't, brudder," Vinegar said propitiatingly. "But whut do an ole nigger like you dress up like you fer? Dar ain't no fun'ral to go to an' us ain't habin' no lodge meetin' to-night."

"Dey's yuther reasons fer dressin' up," Pap said with a grin.

Vinegar slapped his hand to his head and a sudden remembrance transformed his countenance.

"I like to fergot dat weddin' complete! I onderstan' now—you's ragged out fer de weddin'. I muss be gittin' ole an' fergitful. An' I got some questions to ax dat widder befo' she steps off."

Vinegar hurried away and Pap stood grinning after him. When the colored clergyman was lost to sight in the crowd, Pap turned away, mumbling to himself:

"Dat Vinegar Atts never did hab no sense. Now he raves an' rambles when he talks wid his mouth. De Shoofly needs a new up-to-date preacher."

Pap walked over to the tabernacle, sought out Mrs. Solly Skaggs, and bowing with exaggerated courtesy, he asked:

"Kin I dance dis here prize dance wid you, Sister Solly?"

A shrill cackle of laughter rattled in Pap's ear and he turned to look into the sardonic face of Skeeter Butts.

"I done saved you, Sister Solly," Skeeter snickered.

"You done got left, Pap," Solly remarked. "I's dancin' fer de prize wid Figger Bush."

"You's gwine to win de prize, too, Solly," Skeeter said in a low tone. "Dat is, ef you dances wid Figger. You cain't git a showin' dancin' wid Pap. Ole age an' fatness makes a powerful poor combine in a dance."

"We ain't axin' you fer no remarks," Pap snarled, turning to Skeeter.

"Beg parding fer buttin' in, Pap," Skeeter laughed. "I wus jes' surprised dat you wus takin' up dancin' at yo' age."

Skeeter turned away, and as Pap had failed to secure a partner, there was nothing for him to do but retire from the floor, lamenting the fact that he had paid a dime for the privilege of dancing and lost his money. He sat down on a bench on the edge of the throng and gave himself up to deep meditation.

"I got lef' dat time," he grumbled to himself. "But dis am jes' de fust day of de frolic. I got plenty time yit. Fur as I know, I's de only man aim-in' fer her, an' de only onmarried man in de town."

He lighted a pipe and sat smoking for five minutes. Then a new idea came:

"Wash Jones is de high boss of dis show, an' I reckon Wash knows de widder. I oughter git Wash to he'p me hook her."

At this point Popsy Spout wandered up to the bench and addressed Pap.

"I done loss my way in dese groun's Pap," he complained. "Dar's so many wagins an' buggies an' niggers dat I can't find de cabin whar I sleeps at."

"You ain't aimin' to sleep now, is you?" Pap asked.

"I goes to bed reg'lar 'bout dis time."

"Eve'ybody is stayin' up to see de dance," Pap said.

"I's ag'in dancin'," Popsy declared, with disgust in his tones. "Me an' none of my kinnery follers atter de sinful dance. I done teached 'em better."

"Teached who better?" Pap asked quickly, planning for revenge.

"Figger an' Scootie," Popsy declared. "Bofe of dem young folks abstains from de dance."

"Who say dey does?"

"I says," Popsy replied impatiently.

"Whut would you do ef you wuster see Figger dancin' to-night, Popsy?" Pap asked in wheedling tones.

"I'd bust his head wid my stick an' I wouldn't

let him inherit none of my dollars, an' I'd drive him an' his nigger wife outen my cabin," the old man announced irately.

"I's kinder skeart Figger is a deceitful nigger, Popsy," Pap said in a bitter voice. "I happens to know dat he is gwine dance in de prize-dance to-night."

"'Tain't so," Popsy snapped. "I done tole Figger to go to bed."

The music started in the pavilion and Pap rose to his feet.

"Come wid me, Popsy," Pap said. "I'll show you dat Figger ain't as good as you thinks he is."

On the edge of the crowd Popsy shaded his age-dimmed eyes with the palm of his hand and watched the swaying forms until he recognized Figger Bush. Figger's dancing partner was the easiest thing to see on the floor, but Figger was completely eclipsed at intervals in the convolutions of the dance.

If Mrs. Solly Skagg had been white, she would long ago have been signed up by some enterprising showman and her monstrosities exhibited to every community in the country. But being of color, she furnished a free show to all the colored people in her vicinity, and to-night Figger Bush looked like a pickaninny swinging on to a balloon and trying to drag it to the ground. Mrs. Skaggs was active, not graceful, and most of the time Figger's

feet were in the air and he was swinging onto the ample form of his partner with both hands.

The crowd saw the fun and went into hysterics. Popsy Spout saw the exhibition and became hysterical also, but for other reasons. He walked forward and pounded the floor with his patriarchal staff and screeched Figger's name, demanding that he desist at once and go to bed. But four big horns in the Tickfall brass band were blaring as the performers tried in vain to blow out their brains through the mouthpieces, and Popsy's whining voice was like the note of a cricket in a storm.

The old man finally snorted his disgust, expressing his sentiments for the amusement of the few around him who could hear, and tried to push his way out of the crowd. But they were packed densely around him, and in spite of his wishes, Popsy had to stay and see the rewarding of the prizes.

Wash Jones stepped out and made the announcement:

"Dis am de fust night of de prize dancin' an' so I's bestowin' de prize on whut I calls de lucky-name dancers. I done wrote de name of eve'y couple on a card an' put de names in dis sack. I now proceeds to shake 'em up an' will put my han' in dis sack an' draw out one card. Ever who's name is writ on de card is de winner of dis dance, no matter ef dey kin dance or not. To-morrer

night we will hab reg'lar app'inted judges an' nobody cain't win dat cain't dance."

He thrust his hand into the bag, stirred the cards around for a moment, created suspense by fumbling with the bag and making jocose remarks to entertain the crowd. At last he found the card pinned to the bottom of the bag, took out the pin, and brought forth the names of the winners.

"Figger Bush an' Mrs. Solly Skaggs!"

There was a moment of intense silence which made Wash Jones wince with fear. Then a howl of derisive laughter swept over the crowd and every dancing couple was completely satisfied. All thought that mere chance had determined the selection, and all knew that Solly and Figger were the worst dancers in the world.

The lucky couple advanced and received the prizes, bowed to the derisive crowd and started to retire. Then Popsy Spout advanced to the center of the dancing floor, waving his big staff like a baseball bat, his high, shrill, whining voice cutting the silence like a knife.

"Figger Bush, you is a wuthless, lyin', deceitful cuss! I done advised you to abandon dancin' an' you promised to do it. I tole you to go home an' go to bed, an' now you done put on yo' clothes an' snuck outen yo' cabin an' come down here to dis sinful dance. You git on home an' when I comes I's gwine hide you wid dis stick!"

"Don't make no scenery, 'opsy," Figger

pleaded. "I didn't really intend to dance but dis here woman betrayed me into treadin' a tune or two wid her an' I couldn't resist."

"You means dat you wus tempted by dis here woman?" Popsy whined.

"Dat's whut," Figger replied solemnly.

"You go home an' repent an' refawm!" Popsy shrieked. "Do it befo' de good Lawd draps a brickbat on yo' head outen de sky! Git!"

Figger pocketed his nickel-plated cigarette holder and moved away.

Popsy turned and surveyed the ample proportions of Mrs. Solly Skaggs.

"You needs a good steady husbunt to keep you back from yo' evil ways, sister," he announced. "You didn't hab no call to lead my little Figger Bush into evil ways."

"I won't do it no more, Popsy," Mrs. Skaggs said easily.

Old Popsy Spout growled like a senile bear and moved away. On the edge of the platform Pap was waiting for him, feeling well satisfied with himself and the revenge he had achieved.

"Pap, Figger Bush is done cut hisse'f off from me ferever," the old man snapped. "I's gwine drive him an' his wife outen my house an' home."

"You'll git pretty lonesome, won't you, Popsy?" Pap asked idly.

"Naw!" the old man snapped. "I's gwine marry agin right away."

"Who you done picked fer de gigglin' bride, Popsy?" Pap asked with utter indifference.

"I done picked de widder Solly Skaggs," Popsy proclaimed. "I's gittin ole an' blind an' she's big enough fer me to see as fur as my eyesight goes. By dis time nex' year, she'll be too fat to dance an' us'll bofe be of de same mind on dat. She needs some sotted husbunt to lead her outen de error of her ways. Excusin' dat, she's collected her insurance money an' I ain't got no real good objections to a little more dough. I needs it fer my ole age."

He moved away leaving Pap Curtain gasping for breath, stupefied by utter amazement.

VI

"A CUSSIN' CASE"

Half an hour later Skeeter and Figger met in the Hen-Scratch saloon to discuss the events of the evening.

"We shore knocked de skin offen Pap Curtain's nose to-night, Figger," Butts exulted. "Dat's de way so keep on. We'll show dat ole man dat he cain't beat us at dis game."

"Never no more fer me, Skeeter," Figger said earnestly. "I got to repent an' refawm an' dodge brickbats. Atter you dances one time wid a ole sook-cow like Solly, 'tain't no trouble to repent an'

refawm. But I's shore much ableeged fer dis cigareet holder. I been needin' one fer a long time."

"You gimme dat cigareet holder back," Skeeter snapped. "Us kin use it fer all de yuther prizes, an' I proposes to git my money back by smokin' it myself."

"I knowed you warn't gwine be lib'ral wid yo' gifts," Figger said, as he reluctantly produced the holder and passed it to Skeeter. "I oughter lost dat prize befo' I showed up here."

"You kin git de good outen it by watchin' me smoke it," Skeeter snickered. "An' ef we bust Pap's plans about startin' a saloon, mebbe I'll let you smoke it a few times to keep yo' feelin's from gittin' hurt."

At that moment the door of the saloon opened and old Isaiah Gaitskill came across the room to where the two men sat at a table. Isaiah was one of the landmarks of Tickfall, withered and wrinkled and dry like the hull of a walnut, his gray hair fitting his head like a rubber cap, over eighty years of age, but as hard and active as a soldier.

"Ole fellers like you oughter be in bed, Isaiah," Skeeter announced as he waved the visitor to a chair.

"Fellers nearly as ole as me is not only stayin' up late but dey is figgerin' 'bout gittin' married," Isaiah replied with a grin.

"Pap Curtain ain't nigh as old as you," Figger retorted.

“ 'Tain't Pap I's alludin' to,” Isaiah answered. “It's brudder Popsy Spout whut's studyin' matrimony.”

Many things had happened to those two young men in their variegated and adventurous careers, but nothing had ever happened to produce such a shock as Isaiah's announcement. Figger uttered a startled exclamation, started to rise from his seat, then sank back with his chin in his collar and collapsed like a punctured tire. Skeeter Butts pawed the air in front of his face with both hands as if fighting off invisible insects; he made inarticulate noises in his throat, shut his teeth down so hard on his celluloid nickel-plated cigarette holder that he split it for two inches, and then exclaimed despairingly:

“Oh, whoosh!”

The sound was like the feeble exhaust of an automobile that is utterly worn out and broken down and never intends to be serviceable again.

“I come aroun' to ax you-all's is Popsy still got dat thousan' dollars in Marse Tom Gaitskill's bank,” Isaiah proceeded, taking no notice of the terrible effect of his announcement.

“Whoosh!” Skeeter sighed again.

“I got a notion dat Popsy's suttinly still got it,” Isaiah continued. “Dat ole monkey don't spen' no money—he saves it.”

“Whoosh!” Skeeter muttered.

There was a long silence, the men looking at

each other without a word. After a while Isaiah began to drum on the table with his horny fingernails, and the sound was as annoying and as startling in the stillness as the *rat-a-tat-tat* of a woodpecker trying to drill a hole through a tin roof. Slowly Figger recovered his power of speech. He glared at Skeeter uttering one intelligible sentence:

"You is to blame fer dis!"

And then he began to "cuss." It was an edifying exhibition to one interested in the use of forcible words, interested in the efficiency attained through long practice and experience, and interested in knowing how copious is the English language in terms of profanity, blasphemy, and execration.

Isaiah listened, casting a glance of admiration toward Figger now and then as he heard some especially pregnant phrases of vituperation, then he said:

"Save a few cuss-words fer future use, Figger. You'll need 'em."

"Keep on, Figger," Skeeter said encouragingly. "Dis here is a cussin' case an' you ain't done de case justice even yit."

"I ain't gwine stay here an' listen," Isaiah snapped. "I jes' stopped by to ax about Popsy's finances. Ef he's still got de dough he had when he arrived up at dis town, he's got twicet as much as de gal he's studin' to marry an' dat'll make a good match."

"Hol' on, Isaiah," Figger wailed. "Who did you say Popsy was aimin' to marry?"

"I ain't specified," Isaiah grinned, reaching for his hat and preparing to go. "But I don't mind tellin'—it's my stepchile by my fourth wife's fust marriage, Mrs. Solly Skaggs!"

The exclamation which Figger uttered at this information indicated that he had exhausted all the treasuries of speech: language could go no further.

"I tole you to save some cuss-words," Isaiah grinned.

Skeeter groaned, fanning himself with his hat.

"Dar won't be enough room in Popsy's little cabin fer Figger an' his wife an' Popsy an' his wife," he meditated aloud. "Solly is a cabin-full all by hers'f."

"Popsy is shore gittin' plenty fer his money," Isaiah chuckled. "I's glad she's ended up dat way. Dat fat gal kin eat as much as fo'teen chillun an' a cow an' a calf. I don't hanker to suppute her."

"How come Popsy made up his mind to ack a fool so suddent?" Skeeter wailed.

"He seen Figger dancin' wid Solly an' he don't approve of dat exoncise. He's marryin' Solly to refawm her an' to git him a new housekeeper because he's gwine chase Figger an' Scootie outen his cabin fer deceivin' him."

Sometimes when you step on the shell of a dead

turtle it makes a ridiculous squeak. Figger made a noise like that.

"Bad luck, Figger," Skeeter said sympathetically, as he took the broken nickel-plated cigarette holder from his mouth and handed it to Figger. "I gives you dis little present to show my sad feelin's todes you."

Figger's mental perturbation was such that he stuck it in his mouth, struck a match and tried to light it without placing a cigarette on the end.

"Dis is awful," he sighed.

"I reckon Popsy is expeckin' me back about now," Isaiah remarked as he arose. "As Solly's nachel gardeen, he axed me to speak up to Solly an' find out ef she wus willin'. But fust I come to see how Popsy was fixed financial. Solly ain't hankerin' to take in no white folks' washin's to suppute a ole gizzard like Popsy."

"Whar is Popsy now?" Skeeter asked eagerly.

"He's at Shin Bone's resterant here in town," Isaiah replied.

"Us will go wid you, Isaiah!" Skeeter exclaimed. "Ef dar's a weddin' plannin' I wants to he'p it along."

The three men hurried to the eating-house as rapidly as Figger's feeble knees could carry him. Skeeter had to support his friend by holding his arm, for all Figger's vital force was gone. They found Popsy the only patron of the place and he was using a long table in the middle of the room,

not for the consumption of food, but for a bed! He was stretched out full length on the table, his arm under his head for a pillow, his rusty stove-pipe hat placed beside him.

"Dis here bridegroom is takin' a nap," Skeeter snickered, as he walked in and sat down at the table beside the sleeping man. The others saw no reason to arouse him from his slumbers, so they sat down beside him and looked at the sleeper. Skeeter walked to another table, picked up a stalk of celery and brought it back and placed it in Popsy's hand where it rested upon his breast.

Taking off his hat, he placed it with exaggerated solemnity over his heart and sighed with pitiable sadness:

"Don't he look nachel? Ain't dat a sweet smile on his face? He looks jes' like I seed him yistiddy—ain't changed a bit!"

He walked over to Figger, leaned down, and whispered:

"Wus you acquainted wid de corp'?"

"I knowed him real good," Figger answered, glaring at the prostrate form. "He shore wus a devilish ole cranky nigger."

"When does de fun'ral orgies take place?" Skeeter whispered. "Is de Revun Vinegar Atts gwine 'fishiate at de 'terment? Po' ole man—atter all his troubles, he is at rest!"

A slovenly waitress approached the whispering

men, yawned prodigiously, and gazed at Popsy with a stupid face.

"I wants you-alls to wake up Popsy an' tote him off home to bed. Dis here ain't no nursery. I's sleepy an' it's time to shet up dis house."

Pap Curtain, on his way home from Coon Island, saw the men gathered around Popsy and entered.

"Whut ails Popsy, brudders?" he exclaimed. "Is de ole man sick?"

"Naw," Skeeter snapped. "No such good luck. Mebbe ef he sleeped here till mawnin' he'd roll off dis table an' break his fool neck!"

"He's love-sick," old Isaiah cackled. "He gittin' ready to marry."

"Shore!" Pap snarled. "He tripped up my legs an' throwed me down. I wus in hopes Popsy wus sick—less shove him off dis table an' kill him!"

Then another man entered the restaurant. He was a fat, pot-bellied negro, his head bald except for two tufts of hair growing over his ears which made him look like a big fat-faced mule wearing a blind bridle.

"Hello, brudders!" the Rev. Vinegar Atts belowed. "How come you-alls didn't stay at de weddin'?"

"Never heard tell about dat'n," Skeeter exclaimed. "Who is de victims?"

"Brudder Wash Jones an' Sister Solly Skaggs!"

"Whoo-pee-ee!" Figger Bush screamed. "De

Lawd wus shorely wid me. Wash is done saved my life!"

Figger's wild yell of exultation aroused Popsy from his slumbers. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. Then he saw Isaiah Gaitskill.

"I done decided not to marry Solly, Brudder Isaiah," he whined. "I tuck a little nap an' I dreamt a dream dat Calline, my fust wife, come to me an' warned me to beware of widders. She said dey wus awful treach'rous an' deceivin'."

"Calline is got it right, Popsy," Pap sighed. "My little romance is snipped in de bud."

"Wash an' Solly had dat case fixed up in N' Awleens," Vinegar told them. "Solly wouldn't marry Wash onless he had de same amount of money dat she inherited from her husbunt. So Wash arrived in Tickfall, started a Coon Island like N' Yawk has, collected five-hundred admissions at one dollar per each, married Solly an' lit out on de midnight train."

"Whut becomes of dat Coon Island?" Pap asked.

"Wash axed me to hand dat whole shebang over to you fer a consolation prize," Vinegar answered.

The First High Janitor

I

"Dis here nigger Uplift League is shore gittin' active, Figger," Skeeter Butts remarked one morning as he entered the Hen-Scratch saloon and seated himself at a table beside his partner.

Figger Bush sat with his knife-blade poised over the top of the pine table, trying to devise some new design to carve upon that piece of furniture. He showed his lack of interest in the league by replying:

"Dem Uplifters ain't gwine lift me up. I's a heavy-weight."

"You always wus a sinker," Skeeter smiled, as he watched Figger sketch the outline of an Indian face in the soft pine with his knife-point before beginning to carve. "You jes' nachelly went down ever since I knowed you."

"Dese Uplifters is uppity, biggity, high-brow niggers. Dey's always jawin' about high cullud sawciety, an' who b'longs an' who ain't b'long. Dey ain't black folks; dey's play-like whites."

"Dey's actin' an' playin' like niggers now,"

Skeeter grinned. "Dey's in a awful row 'bout who's gwine be elected to de high-up offices of de Uplift. I never seed de beat of de politickin' dey's doin'."

"Nobody ain't politicked me yit," Figger murmured, as his knife slowly moved through the soft pine. "I reckon votes ain't fetchin' so awful high price."

"Dem Uplifters is gwine uplift de price befo' de election is over," Skeeter told him. "Ef I had a real loud voice an' could holler an' bawl an' whoop, I'd run fer presidunt of de league myself."

"You jes' fergit dem notions off yo' mind," Figger growled. "I ain't aimin' to keep dis saloon an' do all de odd jobs while you yelps aroun' like a kicked dawg about whut oughter be done fer de poor, oppressed cullud race."

"But de Uplifters is done fergot de po', oppressed cullud niggers an' is thinkin' up cuss names to call each yuther wid," Skeeter explained. "Some Uplifters ain't in favor of de way de yuther uplifts is liftin', an' dey's tryin' to git good rid-dunce of Mustard Prophet an' put Pap Curtain in his place as presidunt."

"Pap Curtain is a slick-head nigger," Figger growled. "He's heap mo' crookedder dan a dawg's hind leg. Nobody cain't never git Pap straight."

"Dat's de kind of man to git elected," Skeeter snickered. "It'll take a slick-head to beat Mustard."

"You real shore dey ain't gwine run you fer presidunt?" Figger asked suspiciously.

"Dey ain't got no notion of dat kind," Skeeter replied. "Dey don't see me at all. Dis here is gwine be a real election an' it takes a loud speaker to git votes. My voice is too squeaky an' my size is ag'in' me. A little runt like me wid a screech-owl voice couldn't git elected as free-meat man in a dawg town."

"I's glad you's so modest, Skeeter," his friend grinned. "My idear is dat dis saloon is gwine be de chiefest headquarters of bofe sides of de Uplifters. We'll rake in a heap of dollars by bein' puffleckly neuter in dis race. Ef we takes sides, we loses money."

"Dat's so," Skeeter agreed. "But I heerd Pap Curtain talkin' down in Dirty-Six an' Pap got de right notion. He says dat we need new blood in de Uplift League. He says dem officers whut's got de honors now jes' holds deir jobs an' don't do nothin'. He says our race is sinkin' down because dem Uplifters ain't liftin' up. He says dat de pusson who will git charge of dat league an' make it active an' yellervate de race will be Tickfall's most leadin' cullud sitson."

"I wouldn't object to bein' de leadin' member of de Tickfall blacks," Figger sighed. "But I's like you—I ain't got de voice. I's got de heft on you, but I don't weigh as much as Hitch Diamond or Vinegar Atts, an' ef weight an' voice is gwine

win out, Ginny Babe Chew is got us all beat a mile."

"Dat's a funny thing about dis here race," Skeeter chuckled. "Ginny Babe Chew is a runnin', too!"

"Uhuh!" Figger grunted. "Dat means dat eve'y Uplifter in de league is gwine have a rep onless dey votes fer her. Dat ole woman knows all desins all de niggers in Tickfall is cormitted. She tells 'em, too. An' when it comes to callin' cuss-names, all us is new beginners to Ginny Babe. Dat gal's had expe'unce."

"I ain't gwine mess wid it, Figger," Skeeter said, as he thought uneasily of the things Ginny might tell about him. "I don't want my rep ruint by Ginny Babe. Us'll bofe be neuter an' keep dis saloon."

At that moment the door of the saloon was pushed open and a diminutive darky named Little Bit entered.

Little Bit had apparently robbed a woman's wardrobe for his wearing apparel. For coat, he wore the upper half of a woman's coat-suit, the tail flapping down around his knees and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows to give exit to his short arms. For a shirt, he wore a woman's shirt-waist, silk material, flowered and lacy and frilled. We presume that the woman's husband had contributed the masculine portion of the attire, for the trousers had originally belonged to a man

much larger in the waist and much longer in the legs than Little Bit, and the pants were hitched about his middle and cut off at the knees. For hose, he wore—here I cross my heart and hope I may die—a woman's purple-silk stockings, ending at the feet with a pair of ladies' pumps, gray suède in color with high French heels!

"Whar in de name of mud is you been at?" Skeeter Butts howled as he glared at his wrist-watch. "Is you wuckin' in dis saloon or is you ain't? You expeck me to pay you wages when you comes here at mighty nigh dinner-time an' aims to do a day's wuck?"

"I been listenin' to Pap Curtain make a speech," Little Bit snickered. "He's got a chunk of rock salt in one hand an' a sour lemon in de yuther, an' he's talkin' about all de sins of de Uplifters. He wants me to he'p him win out."

"You!" Skeeter Butts shrieked.

"You!" Figger howled.

"Suttinly," Little Bit answered. "I got plenty influence an' kin git a lot of votes. Pap say to me dat plenty offices is to be give away to his supporters ef he gits elected an' he done tipped me off dat I'll be de fust high janitor at four dollars per mont' pay."

"But me an' Figger is gwine be neuter in dis race," Skeeter snapped. "De Hen-Scratch saloon will be de grand high headquarters of all de politics. Dis saloon mussn't take no sides."

"I ain't no pardner here," Little Bit replied. "Nobody won't pay no mind to me."

"All right," Skeeter said after a moment's thought. "I reckon you don't count fer nothin' nohow. But I don't stand fer no politickin' about dis place. Ef you gits to makin' any of Pap's speeches fer him, I'll shore suppress you."

Little Bit shuffled his high-heeled pumps in a few dance steps to show his contempt for this warning and passed out.

"I hope dis politics disease ain't ketchin'," Figger sighed. "Little Bit is done got de germ."

"'Tain't ketchin'," Skeeter assured him. "But I shore hopes Pap is gwine win out or some yuther good man. Mustard Prophet oughter be squelched."

"I ain't huntin' no job like dat," Figger replied as he closed his knife and looked with admiration upon his handiwork. "I's gwine home to my dinner. Scootie is cooked some hot cakes an' I'm got a gallon of sirup."

II

In Pap Curtain's career he had driven many carriages which transported over the Parish of Tickfall the candidates for the offices within the gift of the people. He now recalled to his profit that every prospective Congressman, Governor, and Senator went from house to house, seeking

out each voter, loudly enunciating their political principles, and soliciting their votes.

Figger Bush, on his way home to his dinner of hot cakes and sirup, found a little group of negroes standing on a corner in Dirty-Six, with Pap Curtain in the midst. Pap gesticulated with his left hand, which held a lemon, and his harsh, snarling voice clearly enunciated the principles on which he hoped to be elected president of the Tickfall Uplift League.

Figger slipped quietly around the little group, determined to go on his way. But Pap would let no possible voter escape.

"Ain't dat so, Brudder Figger Bush?" Pap howled.

"Whut?" Figger asked, brought to a sudden halt.

"Ain't whut I been sayin' true fer a fack?" Pap demanded.

"I ain't heerd nothin'," Figger mumbled, longing to escape.

Pap walked over and laid an impressive and detaining hand upon Figger's shoulder. The crowd moved with Pap and enclosed him, and Figger found himself shut in on all sides.

"I been explavacatin' dat de Uplift League ain't been run right. Ain't dat so?" Pap snarled.

"'Tain't been run to suit me," Figger murmured knowing that he could escape more easily if he agreed with Pap than would be possible if he started an argument.

"Suttin, it ain't!" Pap howled triumphantly. "'Tain't been run to suit nobody. De dues is too high, de members of de league is too choosy about admittin' new members, an' a poor an' meek-seemin' man ain't got no show. Ain't dat right?"

"Shore is," Figger muttered, with some reluctance.

"You know how 'tis yo' own self, Figger!" Pap howled, elated over Figger's endorsement of his position. "I remember once you wusn't allowed to come inside de league meetin' because you had on shoes 'thout no socks!"

"Dat's so," Figger agreed.

"I argufies dat wus a insult an' a outrage!" Pap snarled. "Don't you agree wid dem sentiments?"

"Yes, suh."

"I proclamates dat de members of de league oughter be allowed to dress as dey dern please," Pap howled. "Let 'em come wid socks or widout socks—dem's my docterines!"

A murmur of acquiescence arose from the little group, and Pap with true oratorical instinct felt that he had shot off the one big set-piece of fireworks in his display, and that he had better quit at his climax. Let it be said to his credit that he did not linger to shoot off a single lonesome skyrocket of eloquence, but closed his mouth right there, and laid hold upon Figger's arm and led him down the street and away from the rest of the group.

"I wants you to go to my cabin wid me, Figger," he whispered. "Us oughter git togedder an' whup out dem ins an' git in ourselves."

"Scootie is expectin' me home 'bout now," Figger remonstrated.

"I won't keep you long," Pap assured him.

"Whut you think is my chance to git elected?"

"I reckon you got some show ef you kin git enough niggers to vote fer you," Figger told him.

"It's principles dat gits votes," Pap proclaimed. "I's preachin' de only docterine whut hits a nigger right—eve'y feller do as he please!"

"Preachin' don't git no votes," Figger disagreed. "Mostest votes is got by de man whut gits de mostest niggers to vote fer him and wuck fer him."

"Dat's why I needs you, Figger," Pap said, as they walked up the steps and sat down on a bench on Curtain's porch. "I wants you to come in wid me an he'p me git elected."

"Dar ain't nothin' in de race fer me," Figger declined promptly. "I don't care who is de head leader of de league. I ain't in de Uplift bizzness. I's in de barroom bizzness."

"Dar's plenty in it fer you," Pap told him. "A presidunt is got to hab a vice-presidunt, ain't he? I wants you to run wid me an' be my vice-presidunt. In case I dies or gits in jail, you gits de presidunt job."

Figger Bush drew in his breath sharply, then

sat for a long time in silence, looking into the thick branches of an umbrella china-tree. Honors had been suddenly thrust upon him. Pap was old and his chance of dying was good. He was a "slick-head" negro, and his chance of getting into jail was better. It did not require much imagination for Figger Bush to see all obstacles cleared away, and behold himself as the honored president of the Uplift League.

Scoutie's hot cakes got cold; Figger never did come home to eat them.

Skeeter Butts tended bar alone until sundown before he saw his partner again. When Figger entered, Skeeter howled:

"Looky here, you done been gone long enough to go to a fun'ral an' mourn de loss of yo' best frien'. Did dem hot cakes knock you out?"

"Ain't had none," Figger answered, glancing up in surprise at the sudden recollection of his lost dinner. "Fergot all about 'em."

"Whut ails you? Whar you been at? De fust notion you know, you'll git fired!"

"Ef I gits elected, I don't keer ef——"

"Ef you git—whut?" Skeeter interrupted, his eyes bulging with astonishment, which rapidly changed to anger and disgust.

"Pap Curtain is candidated me to run fer vice-presidunt wid him," Figger explained. "Ef Pap dies or gits in jail, I gits to be plum' presidunt. De chances is pretty good. Pap digs wells fer a livin'

an' he's got plenty good chances to git blowed wid dynamite."

"Positively not!" Skeeter howled. "Dynamite might blow up whar Pap wus, but 'tain't never been quick enough to blow up whar Pap is."

"Anyhow, Pap's a snoopy, slick-head nigger, an' he's got a good chance to git in jail," Figger continued.

"Listen to yo' fool talk!" Skeeter ranted. "Slick-heads don't never git in jail. Dey chooses 'em a pardner or a vice-presidunt, an' it's dat mud-head dat gits in jail."

"Anyways, I'll shore be presidunt some of de time, because when de gram jury meets, Pap always gits de trabbel-itch an' leaves town," Figger rambled on.

Overcome by an assortment of emotions, Skeeter Butts placed his feet on the table and let himself down in his chair until he was sitting on his shoulder-blades. He fanned himself with his derby hat and glared at Figger fairly speechless with wrath.

"Of co'se, I mought not git elected, but me 'n' Pap will gib 'em a good race——"

"You bet you ain't gwine be elected," Skeeter shrieked. "You ain't gwine be allowed to run! You's de wuss loontick I ever did see."

"I ain't no loontick," Figger retorted. "De last words you said to me befo' I lef' fer dinner—

an' I shore regrets dat I loss dat dinner by deprivity—you said you hoped Pap would git elected. Now I ups an' offers to he'p Pap an' you go poppin' off——”

“Stop talkin' to me about Pap Curtain,” Skeeter shouted. “Dat ole brayin' jackace is jes' makin' a noise to git hisself heard. He won't lose nothin' ef he gits beat, but ef you runs wid Pap, us is gwine to lose half dis saloon bizzness because de yuther side won't paternize us none.”

Figger gasped for breath.

“I fergot that arrangement entirely, Skeeter,” he exclaimed. “Us wus gwine keep out of it. But dat won't be so awful bad. Pap an' me an' our crowd will suppote de Hen-Scratch.”

“I's sorry you done ruint us, Figger,” Skeeter said sadly as he arose to go out for his evening meal. “But I freely admits dat you wus a fool an' didn't know no better.”

III

Skeeter slapped his derby hat on his head with such force that it popped like a tambourine in a minstrel show, and stalked angrily out of the room.

He moped down the street and sauntered slowly into the Shin Bone restaurant, sighing pitifully and feeling very sorry for himself.

A slovenly waitress suppressed a yawn, shuffled

across the floor in slipshod shoes, and asked indifferently: "Whut's yours?"

Skeeter waited a moment, hoping that his appearance of personified calamity would impress the woman and she would sympathize with his heart-break, but she looked like she was going to sleep while standing in the middle of the floor so he barked his order:

"I's had so many troubles my appetite is plum' gone, Pearly. Gimme a plate of gumbo soup, a dozen fried oystyers, a bait 'of fried catfish, two slices of apple pie an' a glass of milk, a hunk of watermelon an' a cup of coffee."

He smoked cigarettes and thought up mean things to say to Figger Bush until the order was filled, then courted suffocation for twenty minutes by eating so rapidly that he did not take the time to breathe.

He had reached out for the pie and milk when Shin Bone, the proprietor of the eating-house, came from behind a screen and seated himself at the same table.

"'Lo, Shinny," Skeeter mumbled as he tried to stuff a whole slice of pie in his mouth at one time, and therefore became incapable of coherent speech for the next few minutes.

"Hello," Shin replied, watching Skeeter with interest until the last of the first slice of pie was washed down by the milk. "How's bizzness?"

"'Tain't so awful bad," Skeeter replied. "You

an' me is got good trades. Folks comes to yo' place because dey gits hungry reg'lar, an' dey comes to me because dey gits thirsty reg'lar. All we got to do is to wait till dey comes."

"I ain't find dat true now, Skeeter," Shin said gloomily. "Wid me, bizzness is plum' rotten."

"How come?" Skeeter asked unconcernedly.

"Pol'tics."

Skeeter's interest revived. His second slice of pie lingered half a foot from his mouth, poised upon his hand.

"Dis here Uplift League election has done loss me all de customers I'm got," Shin mourned. "Dey done boycotted me, an' tunked my bizzness in de head wid a ax."

"Dey hadn't oughter done it," Skeeter exclaimed, working himself into a panic. "How did it come to pass?"

"My wife, Whiffle, is de niece of Pap Curtain," Shin explained. "Pap is runnin' fer de president of de Liftuppers ag'in Mustard Prophet. All niggers dat favors Mustard is done cut me out."

"But Pap oughter git you some customers," Skeeter protested.

"Pap ain't got de right follerin'," Shin sighed. "Niggers dat votes wid Pap is de no-shirt, no-sock outfit, an' dat kind ain't got no money to buy vittles. Dey begs deir grub from de cook-ladies in de white folks' kitchen. Mustard Prophet is

got de high-brow, uppity niggers wid him an' dey's got de money an' eats here wid me."

Skeeter nodded in speechless comprehension of the tragedy, the hand which held the pie wavered and sank slowly to the table, for that pie didn't look good to Skeeter any more.

"Dem Mustard Prophet voters say dey ain't never comin' in here no more," Shin said dolefully.

"Ef dey don't feel no better dan I does now, dey wouldn't fotch you much trade, fer dey couldn't eat no more dan a brass monkey," Skeeter sighed, pulling his slice of watermelon closer to him, although unconscious of his action. Beads of apprehensive perspiration stood out on his forehead and a sudden weakness assailed him.

"Whut ails you, Skeeter?" Shin inquired solicitously, for Skeeter had suddenly collapsed like a punctured tire. "Don't you feel good?"

"Somepin I done et is disagreed wid me," Skeeter moaned. "Lemme git dis coffee down me befo' I die!"

Shin waited until Skeeter consumed his coffee and rallied.

"Of co'se, Whiffle cain't he'p bein' my wife, an' she cain't he'p bein' kin to Pap, an' we bofe cain't he'p it ef Pap runs fer presidunt, but we shore is got our nose broke."

"Don't tell me no more, Shinny," Skeeter exclaimed, waving both hands and rising to his feet. "My head is crazy now."

"Is you got troubles, too?" Shin asked sympathetically.

"Troubles?" Skeeter howled. "Ain't you heerd about Figger Bush? He's runnin' fer vice-presidunt wid Pap Curtain."

"You an' me bofe blowed up suckers, Skeeter," Shin said in tragic tones. "Our bizzness is bum an' busted."

"It's powerful bad, Shinny," Skeeter agreed.

"Badder dan you think, Skeeter," Shin said. "Pap an' Figger is shore to be elected."

"How does you dope dat out?" Skeeter asked, panting for breath.

"It lines up dis way," Shin informed him. "Ginny Babe Chew is runnin' her petticoat pol'tics fer presidunt. All of Pap's follerers is sinners in de sight of de Lawd, an' Ginny Babe Chew is done pronounced on deir sins copious an' frequent, so Pap an' his crowd hates her. In dat case, Mustard prophet ain't gwine git as many votes as he oughter had because Ginny Babe is runnin' an' she'll git her voters from Mustard's crowd. Of co'se, when de high-brows splits up deir vote, Pap an' Figger will snow 'em over an' got in solid."

Skeeter felt a sudden weakness in his knees and sat down forcibly on the top of the table. Whereupon he felt considerable moisture in the vicinity of his coat-tail and sprang up to find that he had seated himself upon his slice of watermelon.

"By jacks!" he exclaimed dramatically.

"Figger is done ruint my bizzness an' I done ruint my pants!"

"Ef I wus you, I'd git rid of 'em bofe," Shin suggested, as Skeeter walked out of the restaurant, wiping the moisture from his trousers with his handkerchief.

When Skeeter had gone, Shin found that the slice of watermelon had not been completely crushed and was not entirely unedible, so he drew himself up to the table and thankfully ate the uninjured part.

"Ef Skeeter wusn't such a lightweight, dis whole chunk would hab been sp'iled," he grinned.

He felt better after eating the melon until he suddenly recalled that Skeeter had left the eating-house without paying for his meal.

When Skeeter was outside of the restaurant, he promptly forgot his trousers and started for his home in a trot. He went up the long hill toward the Flournoy place like a brown shadow passing through the darkness, threw open the door of a little shed and seized the crank of his "flivver."

A moment later he was out in the public highway, speeding through the night toward the Nigger-Heel plantation, on which Mustard Prophet was the overseer.

He found Mustard sitting on the porch of his house, shirtless and barefooted, smoking a vile corncob pipe.

"Set down, Skeeter," he said in greeting. "Take

off all yo' clothes an' git cool. Dar ain't no lady folks aroun'."

"I feel real chilly, Mustard," Skeeter said in reply. "Dat is, I's got cold foots."

"Whut ails you?"

"I been hearin' dat a move is started to kick you out as presidunt of de Liftup League."

"Dat's so," Mustard said indifferently. "Dey cusses me fer whut I does an' dey cusses me fer whut I ain't do, an' now dey is tryin' to boost me out an' drap me down."

"I don't favor it, Mustard," Skeeter said earnestly. "I come out to offer my he'p. You oughter hab me to scuffle fer you durin' de day while you got to wuck on dis plantation."

"Dat's a good notion, Skeeter," Mustard said thankfully. "I app'int's you he'per right now."

"Hol' on, Mustard," Skeeter said. "It don't go so fast an' easy as dat. In de fust place, I wants de Hen-Scratch saloon to be de headquarters of yo' side in de race."

"I'll arrange dat," Mustard said easily.

"In de nex' place, I wants to run wid you on yo' side fer vice-presidunt," Skeeter continued.

"I'll fix dat easy," Mustard said. "Dar ain't nobody wid good sense dat wants to be vice-presidunt of nothin'. Dat's like bein' de curl in a pig's tail—jes' ornamental behind."

"'Tain't no diffunce, I wants dat job," Skeeter insisted.

"I announces you to-morrer," Mustard said.

"Dat's all, Mustard," Skeeter concluded, as he slapped his hat on his head. "I got to hustle back now an' start my voters to wuckin'."

"Dar now!" Skeeter said to himself exultantly, as his little machine rattled off the miles back to Tickfall. "I done got dat fixed right. Figger is vice-presidunt on one side an' I is vice-presidunt on de yuther side, an' bofe sides is promised to make de Hen-Scratch deir headquarters."

Seven miles of sandy road slipped under his flying wheels like a brown ribbon while he contemplated this master stroke of business. He placed his little machine under the shed and climbed into bed before he spoke to himself again:

"Dat's whut I calls a good sense compromise."

IV

"Now, Figger," Skeeter Butts announced the next morning, "I got such a idjut fer a partner in dis here saloon dat I had to go git myse'f candiated fer pol'tics."

"Is you runnin' fer presidunt?" Figger asked. "I thought you said you squealed too much when you talked."

"I's runnin' fer vice-presidunt," Skeeter said solemnly. "I's runnin' wid Mustard Prophet an' us is shore gwine gib you an' Pap Curtain a happy time gittin' elected."

"Dat looks bad to me, Skeeter—pardners in bizzness runnin' ag'in' each yuther."

"Dat's de best bizzness trick I's done yit," Skeeter said confidently. "Bofe sides uses dis house fer headquarters. I sells drinks to de Mustard Prophets an' you sells drinks to de Pap Curtains, an' we ketch 'em comin' an' gwine."

"I sees," Figger exclaimed in a voice which throbbed with admiration. "Dat's de best nigger idear in Tickfall. We'll git rich an' one of us will git elected."

"Look out fer Ginny Babe Chew!" the voice of Little Bit proclaimed from the other end of the room, where the little darky wrestled with a broom. "She's de one whut'll ketch you-alls comin' an' gwine!"

"Us don't care nothin' fer dat ole squawkin' fat hen," Skeeter replied contemptuously.

"You better not git too close," Little Bit warned. "Dat ole hen'll peck you!"

"Shut up! You git dis saloon cleant up. Us is expect plenty comp'ny to-day."

"It wus a narrer squeak fer us, Figger," Skeeter said earnestly. "When you didn't stay neuter dis bizzness wus 'bout to go bust until I made dem new arrangements."

During the day Pap Curtain came in and held sundry whispered conferences with Figger Bush. Mustard Prophet drove to town and was closeted for two hours with Skeeter Butts. Both men were

arranging for a conference at the Hen-Scratch saloon that night with their henchmen, and both barkeepers were feeling elated at the prospect of a prosperous evening.

Then Vinegar Atts entered and spoiled it all. He left his little red runabout snorting and spitting outside the door while he entered with haste carrying some of the paraphernalia of a fisherman.

"Gimme a little snake-bite med'cine, Skeeter," he yelled. "I's in a hurry. I's gwine fishin' an' I's heard tell dat snakes in plenty in de swamp."

"Is fish bitin'?" Figger inquired.

"Dunno," Vinegar replied. "I done selected dis occupation to keep from stayin' in town. Dat Uplift election is done deprived me of my goat. I's skeart to stay here an' git on either side. It'll bust up my Shoofly chu'ch."

"Ef us wus twins an' could git on bofe sides, dat wouldn't be so bad, would it?"

"Whar you been at dat you don't know nothin'?" demanded Vinegar in disgusted tones. "Some of dem niggers whut represent bofe sides come to my chu'ch to prayer-meetin' last night, an' dey got in a fight at de door of de meetin'-house!"

"Dey oughter be churched!" Skeeter exclaimed.

"Dey would hab been churched, only I agonized wid 'em an' got 'em to bury de hatchet. But I ain't runnin' no risks. Dey buried de hatchet, but dey left de handle stickin' out!"

"Dat's bad news, Rev'un," Skeeter sighed. "Dis here am de official headquarters of bofe sides."

"Bad luck, Skeeter!" Vinegar bellowed as he started toward the door. "You better hang a piece of black crape on de Hen-Scratch door and go fishin' wid me. Dem niggers will shore rough-house you when dey git started, an' you'll be same as dead."

Vinegar departed, leaving uneasiness and anxiety where confidence had been.

In the evening, the saloon rapidly filled with negroes who came in from the country. They were all hardy men, with muscles of oak and iron—one-shirt, one-gallus fellows of the baser sort, who despised the colored man who lived in town, wore a derby hat, sported a high collar, and was stuck up. These were all sullen and devoted adherents of Pap Curtain, and after listening for a while to their bitter anarchistic talk, Figger Bush became frightened of his own supporters and wished there was some easy and unostentatious way to resign.

"Dem fellers is rambunctious," he whispered fearfully to his partner. "Dey comes at eve'y-thing butt-end fust an' hits it wid a jolt. I wish I hadn't never et outen de same spoon wid 'em."

"Don't stir 'em up too much, Figger," Skeeter urged him. "Mebbe when some of my gang comes in dey'll calm down a little."

But Skeeter found that when a bull is mad the

sight of another bull does not calm his spirit; it rouses him to battle.

A number of town negroes drifted in, took a look at the situation, and drifted quietly out. They had counted the number of Pap's adherents and had gone for reënforcements, for the saloon was soon filled with men who were loud in their praise of Mustard Prophet, and they outnumbered Pap's followers three to one.

Pap's crowd, dusty, ragged, trampish-looking, drew off at one end of the saloon and composed a little, sour, ugly bunch; over against the more dressy Tickfall bunch, they were a sad contrast, and they felt it.

Then Pap Curtain entered the scene, and his followers took heart.

Pap was practicing the political trick of looking like he belonged to the great common people, and had come up from the commonest of them all. He was a grave-digger and well-digger by profession, and he looked to-night like he had just finished the job of digging all the graves and wells that would be needed in Tickfall Parish for many years to come. There was fresh clay on his clothes and hat and shoes; clay streaked his yellow baboon face, and was plastered thick upon his horny hands. He joined his bunch with many noisy greetings and much hand-shakings, and glared over at the town crowd with every manifestation of contempt that he could devise.

Mustard Prophet came in and joined the town crowd. He was a good-natured, easy-smiling, hard-working negro who had the confidence and esteem of all the people in the town, white and black. Yet he was a real country negro, who had never lived in Tickfall in his life, while Pap had spent many years in Tickfall and owned his cabin there.

Smilingly, Mustard turned to Skeeter, and said, loud enough for everyone to hear:

"Less git dese here obsequies started, Skeeter. What am de plogram?"

"I ain't fixed up no special diagram," Skeeter muttered. "Mebbe we mought start somepin off ef bofe de leadin' candidates made a speech."

"Let 'em speech!" a number of voices exclaimed.

"Brudders, I introduces Pap Curtain," Skeeter announced. "He's runnin' fer presidunt of de Uplift. We axes him to say de fust words."

"I ain't used to speakin' 'thout I kin cuss," Pap Curtain began, in his snarly voice, gazing at the Prophet aggregation with contemptuous eyes and sneering lips. "When I sees a lot of dude niggers tryin' to ack like Gawd made a mistake when He didn't make 'em white, I don't cuss, because I ain't able to do the subjeck jestice. I thanks de good Lawd dat I ain't nothin' but a corn-fiel' nigger, brudder of de cotton-fiel' mule, an' I makes my livin' diggin' wells, ditches, an' graves. I done dug de graves of all de dead, an' now I's gittin'

ready to dig de graves of some dat's livin'. We corn-fiel' niggers will bury Mustard Prophet an' his Tickfall dudes when de day of votin' comes!"

A sullen note of applause came from Pap's ugly-looking crowd, but there was no enthusiasm, no good-will. In a word, Pap's crowd were not good sportsmen. One man took a big red apple out of his pocket, wiped it off on the leg of his trousers and began to eat it.

"I now introduces Mustard Prophet," Skeeter announced uneasily.

There was handclapping, several shouts of applause. Mustard's crowd had been trained in the lodges and the various clubs and knew a little better how to act under the circumstances.

"I don't see no reason fer gittin' sour an' ugly, brudders," Mustard began. "Nobody ain't gwine lose much ef he don't git elected presidunt of de league. In de last year I ain't got nothin' fer my presidunt job but a cuss-word eve'y time I do somepin dat don't please nobody. Of co'se I wants to keep on wid dis job an' hopes you won't fergit to vote fer me. Pap Curtain says he's a corn-fiel', cotton-fiel' nigger, but dar ain't no man, white ner black, dat ever seed him wuckin' in no kind of fiel' as a country nigger oughter do. He lives in dis town, an' he owns his house in dis town. As you-all knows, I's a real country nigger, never did live in town, an' I been de overseer of Marse Tom's plantation fer twenty year. I tries to

stand by de high notions of de Uplift. I preaches dat a feller ought to dress up in work clothes when he wucks, an' put on his compan'y clothes when he goes out in sawciety, an' wear his Sunday clothes at de lodge an' de fun'ral an' de meetin'-house——”

At this point the apple-eating adherent of Pap Curtain had consumed his apple to the core. He balanced it on his thumb as a child prepares to shoot a marble, and flicked it across the room, where it landed on the top of Mustard Prophet's bald head.

Mustard Prophet stepped down from the chair on which he was standing, walked quietly across the room, laid hold of the collar of the offender, kicked his shins, punched his jaw, then turned him around and booted him across the room.

It was no more than the offender deserved, but he offered all the resistance and counter-offensive in his power, and while this was going on someone slipped behind Mustard and administered a lusty and soul-satisfying kick to him.

The notion became contagious. The two forces joined in combat, but, strange to say, they did not fight with fists, but with feet.

“Look at dat!” Little Bit exclaimed, as he scrambled to a safe place on the top of the bar, where he danced up and down in his high-heeled pumps. “Eve'ybody is tryin' to kick eve'ybody else!”

In a moment the crowd was so cramped for room that they had to abandon that mode of combat and began to fight with their fists. They milled around and around, pounding, scrouging, punching with elbows, while their voices rose in a mighty diaphony of imprecation and abuse.

"Lawd! Lawd!" Little Bit exclaimed in a prayerful voice from his place of safety on the bar. "Eve'ybody is tryin' to hit eve'ybody else!"

In the fury of battle the men sought other weapons and found the numerous chairs most convenient. In the jam they found it impossible to swing the chairs and hit with them, so they held the chairs before them, as a lion-tamer does, and charged their opponents, holding their heads low to avoid being clubbed. The resemblance to a lot of milling, horning cattle struck Little Bit at once, and from his vantage-point upon the bar he announced the procedure:

"Eve'y bully is tryin' to hook eve'ybody else!"

Skeeter Butts had seen as much of the fray as he could stand, so he ran behind the bar, seized his automatic pistol and fired it in the air, holding the weapon out of the window. He knew how dangerous such a performance was, for it might suggest to the angry negroes the use of their own guns. But he took the chance with the hope that the town watchman would hear the firing and come to the rescue.

The negroes took no notice of the pistol-firing, for some of them had found new and mightier weapons. There were half a dozen tables in the room, and when some of these were overturned, the men wrenched the legs off, and with shouts of glee brought these mighty clubs into action.

"Gawdlemighty!" Little Bit screamed. "Eve'ybody is tryin' to kill eve'ybody else!"

Figger rushed to the electric-switch and turned off the lights.

"Bless Gawd!" Little Bit bawled. "Eve'ybody cain't see eve'ybody else!"

Suddenly a voice cut through the sound and fury of that room.

"Hey, you niggers! Turn on the lights!"

Silence except for the tramping of many feet going toward doors and windows.

"Halt!"

Silence, broken by the sound of running feet. The light flashed on and Little Bit stood by the switch.

"Dey's all went, cap'n," he snickered. "Nobody here excusin' me!"

The watchman pushed open the swinging door and passed out into the night.

"I guess de meetin' is over," Little Bit giggled. "I'll shet up an' go home to bed."

He carefully examined his garments to see that they had not been hurt in the scramble, smoothing his flowered shirt-waist shirt, and pulling up his

purple-silk stockings till they were trim and neat over his legs.

"I'm glad dem scufflers didn't spile my ladylike clothes," he said proudly. "Ginny Babe Chew says I's de sensation of de town!"

V

During the night there was an exodus from Tickfall on the part of certain citizens.

Skeeter Butts and Figger Bush left for the fishing-camp, where Vinegar Atts had taken refuge. They found Pap Curtain and Mustard Prophet sitting in front of a camp-fire, telling the pastor of the Shoofly church the story of their rival race for president of the Uplift League.

The place of assembly was known as the Buz-zard's Roost, a camp hidden deep in the Little Moccasin Swamp on the banks of the Dorfoche Bayou. During the next day, their company was augmented by various negroes who nursed wounds and bruises acquired in the affray in the saloon. But they were all fugitives—and friends now.

Followers of Pap Curtain and followers of Mustard Prophet dug bait and cut poles and rigged up fishing-lines and entered into friendly piscatorial rivalry and forgot all about the elevation of the poor, oppressed colored race. Ten days passed in a happy vacation for the whole care-free bunch.

Then Little Bit made his appearance at the Buzzard's Roost with an important announcement:

"You won't git arrested ef you comes in now, brudders. De police is done fergot all about you."

"Whut's de good news in Tickfall, Little Bit?" Skeeter inquired.

"De election is done winned," Little Bit told him.

"Who am presidunt?" Mustard Prophet asked hopefully.

"Ginny Babe Chew."

A low moan of sorrow came from the throats of the crowd.

"Yes, suh," Little Bit continued. "De Uplift League met an' called a election immediate, an' Ginny got all de votes."

"Who else wus 'lected?" Figger asked.

"Me!" Little Bit grinned proudly. "I was 'lected fust high janitor at four dollars per mont' pay. I'm de only man whut got a job. De lady folks took a look at dese here ladylike clothes an' dey 'lected me unanermous."

There was silence for quite a while. Then Skeeter asked:

"Is de Hen-Scratch pretty much busted up, Little Bit?"

"Naw. 'Tain't hurt any. I nailed de legs on de tables an' patched up de broke chairs an' us is jes' as good off as ever."

Skeeter glanced toward his automobile and rose to his feet.

"I's gwine back to town, niggers!" he announced. "You-all kin foller. De fust drink in de Hen-Scratch is a free-fer-all on me!"

A shout of applause greeted this.

"But listen, fellers," Skeeter said earnestly. "From dis time on, as fer as I'm concerned, pol'tics is nix!"

Family Ties

I

THERE were two men in Tickfall to whom everybody came with their troubles—Vinegar Atts, pastor of the Shoofly church, and Skeeter Butts, proprietor of the Hen-Scratch saloon. Both were reputed among their fellows to be wise in all human experience and equal to every emergency of life upon the earth.

Generally a man in trouble went first to Vinegar Atts, after which he poured his tale into the ear of Skeeter Butts. Each of these modern solons gave the troubled one some expert advice; then the preacher and the barkeeper got together and held a consultation, in which, as in a consultation of physicians, the diagnosis of each was confirmed, but the treatment was changed.

This time it was Shin Bone in trouble. Shin was the proprietor of a hot-cat eating-house, which made him and his wife very popular in the community, for there seems to be a natural affinity between a colored person and a piece of fried catfish.

"Whut ails yo' mind, Shin?" Vinegar asked as Shin sat down on the cabin porch, dropping his old wool hat at his feet.

"I's in deep troubles," Shin said sorrowfully.

"A nigger's trouble is like de rainbow—'tain't got no end," Vinegar philosophized. "But I don't turn no nigger friend down because his troubles won't terminate. I's willin' to he'p you fer any amount up to one dollar."

"'Tain't money troubles," Shin said. "My bizzness is doin' fine, but I ain't gittin' along so powerful good in my fambly."

"You ain't got no fambly, excusin' Whiffle an' yo' baby," Vinegar observed.

"De baby is all right," Shin explained; "but Whiffle ain't doin' so well."

Vinegar sat for a while in an expectant attitude, waiting for Shin to go on with the narration; but Shin found it hard to tell what he had come to say. He made several abortive efforts to get his mouth to going which got no further than a wretched silence and made him look like an idiot.

"Well?" Vinegar bellowed. "Why don't you say somepin? You ack like one of dese here deaf an' dumb mutes celebratin' de Fo'th of July wis noiseless powder."

"My ailment is dis," Shin said desperately, speaking the words in a rush, as if in a hurry to get the confession over. "My wife, Whiffle, is payin' entirely too much attention to yuther nigger men."

Vinegar drew a corncob pipe from his pocket and took a long time to light it, while his attention seemed to be concentrated upon a row of dead trees whose snaggy branches were visible on the Little Mocassin Ridge, four miles away.

Shin fidgeted and twiddled his thumbs. Finally he reached down at his feet for his wool hat, and began to gnaw at its brim, as if he were starving to death. He had chewed nearly around the circuit of the brim before Vinegar took his eyes off the old dead trees; and even then Vinegar merely looked at him and said nothing.

"Yes, suh," Shin continued, finding it easier to talk now that he had made a start. "I always believed dat Whiffle wus jes' as good frien' to me as a wife nachelly gits to be, but now I done changed my mind."

"Who is de man whut runs attter her?" Vinegar asked.

"I don't know, an' I cain't find out," Shin responded. "Of co'se, no nigger man ain't gwine come to see her when I'm hangin' aroun'. Whoever is courtin' Whiffle comes to de back door of de resteraw when I'm out in town somewhar."

"Mebbe it's some of her kinnery dat has sneaked back to town an' ain't hankerin' to be perceived, especially by de police."

"It couldn't be none like dat," Shin replied. "Whiffle ain't got but one kinfolks, an' dat wus her brudder. Dat brudder is plumb absent fer

good an' all. You knows whut happened to him, don't you?"

"Naw, suh," Vinegar answered, scraping his head with the palm of his hand to stir his recollection.

"It come to pass at our weddin'," Shin told him. "Atter we got hitched, a passel of niggers moseyed over to our house to wish us a fussless married life an' git a sasser of ice-cream an' cake. Us soon gobbled up our vittles, an' I gib her brudder, Pewter Boone, a ten-dollar bill to go git some more eats. He went."

"Well?" Vinegar snapped. "Go on wid de story."

"Dat's all," Shin responded. "As I tole you, Pewter went. He tuck my ten dollars an' jes' nachelly abandoned me. He ain't never come back, an' I'm got a hunch dat he's gwine till yit."

"I don't remember when dat nigger lived in Tickfall at all," Vinegar said.

"He didn't live here," Shin said impatiently. "He got his raisin' in N'Awleens. Jes' dropped in day o' the weddin' an' then dropped out before I even took time to get a good look at him. But dat Pewter nigger ain't got nothin' to do wid dis. Us is done side-tracked an' got off de subjeck."

"Whut does you want me to do?" Vinegar asked.

"Keep yo' eye out fer me, an' find out who dat nigger is whut hangs aroun' Whiffle."

"Naw, suh," Vinegar said promptly. "I don't monkey wid no love scrapes. I'm a exput in givin' religious advices, but I ain't no mattermony-fixer. I declines."

"Who muss I take my troubles to?" Shin asked desperately.

"Tell yo' sorrers to de barkeep," Vinegar chuckled. "You knows as well as I do dat Skeeter Butts is de exput mattermony-fixer of dis town."

Shin placed his hat on his head and stood up.

"I aimed to ax Skeeter, too, Rev'un, but I decided to come to see you fust."

"Dat wus right," Vinegar applauded. "I loves to git fusters on eve'y scandal in town."

II

When Shin Bone revealed his trouble to Skeeter Butts, the situation delighted the very soul of the barkeeper.

"At de fust off-startin', my notion is dat a lot of hongry niggers is hangin' aroun' yo' kitchen beggin' fer free vittles," he told Shin. "Whiffle ain't figgerin' on bustin' up her happy home by runnin' off wid some yuther nigger man. I know she ain't got no husbunt to brag on, but she done de best she could at de time, an' husbunts ain't improved so much dat she aims to lop you off."

"Kin you kinder watch aroun' an' see who it is dat's hangin' aroun' de kitchen?" Shin asked.

"Why don't you do yo' own watchin'?"

"I cain't git close enough to see."

"Stay fur away an' look," Skeeter suggested.

He rose, walked around the bar, and brought out a pair of army field-glasses enclosed in a leather case. They were handsome things. He adjusted the lenses to his vision, handed them to Shin Bone and indicated an old tree whose dead limbs pointed upward like the fingers of a gnarled and twisted hand in the Little Mocassin Swamp, three miles away. Shin placed the glasses to his eyes and uttered a yell of surprise.

"My Lawd!" he exclaimed. "I see a red-head woodpecker settin' on one of dem limbs!"

"Suttinly," Skeeter said. "You kin look jes' as fur as you wants to when you look through dem glasses."

"I ain't aimin' to see no funder dan a suttin nigger man," Shin replied. "Atter I see who Whiffle's beau is, I expecks to git a little closer."

"How close?" Skeeter grinned.

"Close enough to shoot at dat nigger six times; an' ef I has bad luck an' misses wid all dem shots, I's gwine throw brickbats at him half an hour," Shin told his counselor.

"All you got to do is to borrer dem glasses an' keep yo' eye on de kitchen."

"Whar would be a good place to hide while I watches?"

In his mind, Skeeter took a survey of all the

surrounding country before he offered a suggestion. Finally he pointed to a tree half-way across the town, on a little hill, and said:

"Ef you climb up in dat tree an' hide yo'se'f in de leaves, I figgers dat you will hab a straight line to look right at yo' kitchen door. Ef I wus you, I'd go out to dat tree right now an' take a look wid dese glasses."

"I'll shore try dat on!" Shin exclaimed. "Does dese here glasses b'long to you?"

"Naw. Dey ain't really mine, but I'll lend you de loant of 'em," Skeeter said. "A feller come to dis saloon an' borrered some money, an' lef' dese here spy-glasses fer s'curity. So, of co'se, dey is mine ontill he fetches back de money whut he borrered."

III

Shin went out to the tree that Skeeter had indicated, seated himself among the branches, and directed his vision to the kitchen door of his restaurant. So powerful were the lenses that it seemed to him that the door was only ten feet away.

First appeared the Rev. Vinegar Atts. Whiffle sat upon the steps and talked to him for some time, much to Shin's disgust.

"Dat ole fat fool said he warn't gwine to butt into my fambly scandal," Shin grumbled. "I

knowed he couldn't keep hisse'f out. He sniffs aroun' atter yuther people's sins like a smell-dog!"

Some minutes later he brought his glasses again to bear upon the kitchen, and was disgusted to find Skeeter Butts on the steps.

"Dat nigger oughter hab sense enough to keep away from dar," he grumbled. "He oughter watch when he knows I ain't watchin'."

Shin's perch in the tree became very uncomfortable before Skeeter left. Then his long waiting was rewarded.

A strange man came to the kitchen door, and Whiffle rushed out to meet him with every manifestation of delight. They sat down together, and Whiffle left no doubt in the mind of her jealous, watchful husband that she was enamored of this new negro.

For more than an hour Shin hardly took the glasses off the man's face. For a while he had the idea that he had seen the visitor somewhere before, but this impression gradually vanished.

He decided that the stranger was a city negro, because of his easy manners. His quick-moving lips showed that he spoke readily, and he carried himself in a way that suggested a soldier. He had typical Ethiopian features, and was what the negroes call "brown-skin."

"Dat is one of dese perch-mouthed city niggers wid big ideas an' small judgment," Shin grumbled

as he climbed down from the tree. "I think I'm done watchin' him to-day. I'll climb up here an' hab a little session wid dat nigger to-morrer."

When he got back to his place of business he found Whiffle just as she had been for several days, bubbling over with excitement and laughter, her nerves atingle with some great secret.

"Whut ails you, Whiffle?" he growled. "You ack like you done seen about seben angels or had about 'leven drams. I ain't had nothin' to perk me up like you is."

"I don't tell eve'ything I knows, Shinny," she laughed, all unconscious of the clouds of jealousy which had gathered over him like a storm above a mountain peak. "A nigger husbunt hadn't oughter know too much."

"Why oughtn't dey know too much?" Shin snapped.

"Because dey's apt to lead deir wives a dance," Whiffle snickered.

"Huh!" Shin grunted. "I's like a jackass—I ain't got no year fer music an' no foot fer dancin'!"

Then he went and loaded his pistol and slipped it into the pocket of his coat.

IV

When Shin described to Skeeter Butts the strange man he had seen at the kitchen door, Skeeter evinced great surprise.

"Dat's de picture of de man whut borrered some money from me an' gib me dem spy-glasses fer s'curity!" Skeeter exclaimed. "You is spyin' on dat man wid his own spy-glasses."

"Ef you'll borrer dat nigger's pistol, I'll shoot him wid his own gun," Shin said.

"You git dat shootin' notion off'n yo' mind!" Skeeter snapped. "Dar is bigger fish in de bayou dan you ever fried in yo' resteraw, an' dar is better nigger women in de worl' dan dat blockhead Whiffle gal you's got in yo' kitchen."

"She suits me, an' ef anybody tries to git her dar's a right smart chance fer fun'rals!"

"Mebbe so," Skeeter said; "but she ain't wuth fightin' fer, especially when a fight will land you in de jail-house."

"Mebbe I kin think up some yuther way to chase dat nigger out of town," Shin said: "but de best way I knows of now is to shoot at him till he gits good an' skeart, an' den throw rocks."

"Dat's de favoryte nigger way of chasin' coons," Skeeter agreed; "but don't git to shootin' an' throwin' ontill I tells you to. Ef dar ain't no better way to disperse dat nigger, mebbe I'll he'p you wid a few bricks myself."

When Shin had gone, Skeeter hastened to the restaurant and called Whiffle out.

"Shin Bone is got jealous about dat new nigger whut hangs aroun' yo' kitchen, Whiffle. I ain't know his name, but you knows him. Shin has

already cleant and oilt his gun, an' is warmin' up fer activations. We don't need no fust-class killin' in dis town, so you better stressify to dat coon whut is comin' to him an' 'suade him to git out."

"Is Shin a pretty good shooter?" Whiffle asked.

"He is de wuss shooter in dis town," Skeeter told her. "He cain't possibly hit nothin' but a innercent standbyer, an' dat would be a luck shot."

"Ef dat's de case, dar ain't no danger," Whiffle said easily. "He never will shoot at nobody."

"When a nigger gits jealousy, he goes crazy in his head, an' he's liable to do mighty nigh anything," Skeeter said earnestly.

"I'll take keer of Shinny," Whiffle laughed. "I's mighty glad you tole me, so I'll know whut to do."

Skeeter returned to the saloon, and half an hour later the strange negro who was owner of the field-glasses came in.

"Skeeter, I wants to gib a free show at de nigger picnic-groun' on de Cooley bayou dis atternoon. I invites eve'ybody, but I 'specially wants you an' Vinegar Atts, an' I would like to hab a nigger named Shin Bone."

"How come you pick out such a crowd as dat fer special eye-witnersers?" Skeeter asked.

"A preacher, a saloon-keeper, an' a resteraw man," the stranger smiled. "A bunch like dat is able to supply all human needs."

"It 'pears to me like you also needs a doctor

an' a undertaker," Skeeter remarked; "but of co'se you knows yo' own bizzness best."

"You'll know my bizzness better at de picnic-groun'," the stranger returned.

"Us will be dar at three o'clock."

V

A great crowd assembled at the picnic-ground. The three men specially invited were sitting under a tree, smoking and waiting. The showman came promptly on time, and shook hands with the three, but did not offer to tell his name.

"Whut name does dey call you by?" Vinegar asked.

"I ain't got no name," the negro grinned.

"Dat's strange!" Vinegar muttered. "I'll call you Stranger, fer shawt."

Stranger carried a heavy sack, and he now untied the top and poured the contents upon the ground. There were two or three dozen marbles, such as children use in their games; there were a dozen or more small apples, about a dozen empty pop-bottles, and several dozen tops of small tin cans.

"I's a pistol-shooter," the stranger announced. "Ef you misdoubts my confession, jes' take a look."

He tossed an apple above his head; quickly he tossed two more, juggling them in the air. Suddenly from somewhere he drew a big pistol, shot

three times with startling quickness, and the shattered apples dropped at his feet.

There are men who are born with the strange gift of demonstrating that the hand is quicker than the eye. In civilized sections of the country men so gifted are sleight-of-hand performers; in other sections, less civilized, they become card-sharps, with the ability to "pitch a good game" and deal themselves cards from the bottom of the deck; in still other sections, they become expert gunmen whose skill as marksmen is a wonder to behold.

The Tickfall crowd stood breathlessly watching the juggler of bottles, apples, marbles. He tossed pop-bottles in the air, and while they were spinning he shot through the neck of the bottle and broke the bottom to pieces without injuring the neck. He threw up the tin tops of the pop-bottles, and unerringly shot through the center of each. He tossed the apples into the air, and shattered them with bullets. He threw marbles three at a time above his head, and they came down in dust.

There was one man on whom this exhibition made a deep impression. Shin Bone had bragged his brags about chasing that very darky out of town by shooting at him and throwing rocks. He now abandoned his idea. That was certainly not the way to rid Tickfall of the presence of the dangerous stranger.

When the exhibition was over, the stranger

turned to the three men who were especially invited and said:

"I'm much obleeged to you niggers fer comin' out to de show. I would like to walk back to town wid you-alls, but I ain't gwine dat way."

"You shore is a shooter, brudder!" Skeeter exclaimed. "Ef you ain't gwine our way, us'll see you later."

As the three walked back to town, Shin said thoughtfully:

"Skeeter, I think you wus right when you said not to hab no shootin' scrape about Whiffle. De way I feels now, ef dat Stranger nigger is gwine shoot fer my wife, he kin jes' take her along 'thout no good objections from me!"

VI

"Looky here, Skeeter," Vinegar Atts announced, when they got back to the Hen-Scratch saloon. "Somepin is got to be did fer Shin Bone. Us cain't let dat Stranger run off wid Shin's wife. It's ag'in' conscience an' religion."

"How we gwine chase him?" Skeeter asked, glancing pityingly at Shin's gloomy face. "Skeeter cain't think up no scheme to apply to him. He don't 'pear to be skeart to shoot it out wid nobody."

"Dar is somepin or yuther dat eve'y nigger in de worl' is skeart of, fellers," Vinegar declared.

"Less find out whut dat coon's pertickler skeer is, an' put it on him."

"How we gwine find out?" Shin asked.

There was no answer to this inquiry, and the three sat silent for a long time, smoking their pipes in gloomy meditation. At last Vinegar sprang to his feet with a yell.

"I got it!" he howled. "A nigger is skeart of anything dat he don't know nothin' about. Dead folks, pest-houses, ha'nts, bein' all by yo' lonely in de dark, hospitals—niggers is skeart of all dem things, because us don't know nothin' about 'em. You cain't ax none of dem things a decent question an' git a respeckful respondence."

"Whut is dat Stranger nigger igernunt about?" Shin asked, his eyes gleaming with hope.

"Pigs!" Vinegar howled. "Is you niggers done fergot dat Marse Tom pulls off his big pig drive to-morrer?"

"Dat don't he'p us none," Skeeter said disdainfully.

"It do!" Vinegar declared. "Us'll git Marse Tom to put dat exput-shootin' nigger at de shootin'-post, an' when he sees dem wild pigs swoopin' down on him, he'll jes' nachelly sprout a couple o' feathers an' fly away from dar. Dem hawgs will run him plumb to de Gulf of Mexico."

"I gitcher!" Skeeter exclaimed. "Yo' mind is suttinly popped off a noble idear. Less go see Marse Tom."

The most interesting event of the year in Tick-fall is the wild-hog hunt. Gaitskill owned the Little Moccasin Swamp, and he had let hundreds of hogs run wild in that jungle and shift for themselves. They lived on the mast and traversed the forest in bands of a hundred or more. They never fattened, being of the razorback variety; but they furnished plenty of cheap pork every year for the hundreds of negroes employed on the Gaitskill plantations.

The weather was cool, and the time had come for the fall drive. There had been no rain for months, the swamp was dry underfoot, and a great picnic crowd assembled from all over the Parish.

Hundreds of men and hundreds of dogs spread out across the swamp, fan-shape, making every sort of a noise that would drive the hogs before them to a point near the Gaitskill hog camp. Here Little Moccasin Lake upon one side and Alligator Lake upon the other were divided by a narrow ridge of land, where the slaughter of the animals would take place.

In the slaughter of the hogs care was exercised not to kill the big fighting males. They were the leaders of the herd, and when they led in a fight for the protection of the females or the young, everything cleared out of their path as before the onrush of an express train. The females were also protected. The young male hogs were slain, their flesh being tender and easily made into hams,

bacon, and salt shoulders for food on the plantation.

This is one of the most dangerous games ever played in the Little Moccasin Swamp. Some of the big male hogs are six feet long and four feet high. They travel with the speed of a race-horse, and have the fighting instincts of a tiger. From their lower jaws great, ugly tusks protrude. They can run at full speed past a horse, and by an upward thrust of that lower jaw can split the flesh of the animal's leg as if cut by a razor, or disembowel him completely.

A man in the midst of a fighting herd is helpless. When he hears an old sow pop her jaws, or sees her coming through the underbrush with a swinish roar, he will climb a prickly ash-tree or jump into a vat of tar to escape.

As the herd on this day was hedged in between the lakes and driven forward, the men heard before them, at the point where the slaughter was to be, the *crack, crack*, of a rifle. When at last the entire crowd had converged at the shooting-post, they found a strange negro standing with dozens of dead hogs around him. A dozen rifles were resting upon the top of a stump by his side; and as the young pigs rushed past him he raised a gun with a careless gesture, fired with seeming indifference but with absolute accuracy, and at each shot a young hog rolled over with a broken neck.

The men watched this exhibition of sharpshoot-

ing with great astonishment. The marksman never seemed to take aim, and yet never missed. Just as a man can reach up and put his finger on his nose, so this man could put a bullet through the neck of a running hog and think nothing of it.

In a little while nearly two hundred hogs were waiting for the knife of the butcher. Everybody lent a hand in the job of dressing them and loading them into wagons for their trip back to town.

Vinegar Atts, Skeeter Butts, and Shin Bone worked together. They spent a great deal of their time in low-toned conversation.

"I figgered dem wild hawgs would chase dat nigger off'n de top of de world," Vinegar lamented as he glanced malevolently toward the stranger, who was sitting beside a stump, smoking a cigarette.

"It didn't pester him at all," Skeeter sighed. "He looked like he enjoyed hisse'f real good. Reckon how come dat nigger didn't git in de army, when he kin fight an' shoot so good?"

"De only way to skeer dat nigger is to take his guns away from him," Shin remarked. "He feels powerful secure when he's got a gun, an' I feels—otherwise."

"Me, too," Vinegar agreed. "An' I bet he sleeps wid dem guns on his pusson!"

Before the day was over, the marksman had been so loudly proclaimed by the white men for his skill that the negroes were feeling proud of this representative of their race and color.

The negro women of Tickfall had prepared a great dinner at the hog camp. While the negroes were eating, the distinguished stranger suddenly left the side of Whiffle Bone and walked around the table to where Shin Bone was standing with Atts and Skeeter Butts.

Shin saw him coming, and turned almost white. When the stranger thrust his hand into his pocket, Shin bleached some more; but the stranger extended toward Shin Bone not a gun, but a ten-dollar bill!

"I owes you dis ten-dollar bill, Shinny," he said, loud enough for everybody to hear.

"I ain't sold you nothin'," Shin said, shaking his head and declining the proffered currency.

"Naw, suh, but you loant me dis money a good many year ago, when you got married," the stranger replied. "You bestowed dis loose change on me to buy some ice-cream an' cake fer yo' weddin', an' I rambled up-town an' got in a little crap-game, an' dem bones didn't fall right fer me. I lost yo' money, an' I decided I better make myse'f absent."

"My Lawd!" Shin Bone exclaimed, reaching for the money. "Is you Whiffle's long-lost brudder?"

"Suttinly," the gunman answered. "My name is Pewter Boone, an' I jes' got back from whar we fit de Kaiser."

"Fer Gawd's sake, how come you didn't tell me

who you was a whole heap sooner?" Shin exclaimed.

"I did tell Whiffle," Pewter replied; "but I wus ashamed to 'fess up to you onless I had de money to pay you back. Soldiers of dis here gover'mint don't do like I done—dey is true to deir trust. I borrered de money from Skeeter an' gib him some spy-glasses fer s'curity, an' waited till I got me a job. Now I pays up an' squares off wid de worl'."

Colonel Tom Gaitskill came up at this moment and announced:

"Boys, Pewter Boone is the new superintendent of the hog camp. Isaiah is too old, and I hired Pewter to-day."

Shin Bone threw his arms around the new superintendent and expressed his delight in vociferous tones. Whiffle came over and joined them in the jubilation. The news quickly spread, and all the negroes in Tickfall welcomed the soldier.

"Look here, brudder," Vinegar Atts bellowed. "Us niggers gib Marse Tom de recommend whut got you de job of killin' dem hawgs. We knowed you could shoot 'em all right, but we didn't expeck you would. We figgered when you perceived dem hawgs a comin' through de brush, you'd skedaddle."

"Huh!" Pewter grunted. "I don't skeer so awful easy. All dem growlin', gruntin' hawgs reminded my mind of dem Bush Germuns. I jes' nachelly craved to 'liminate 'em!"

The Ten-Share Horse

I

A WHITE man entered the Hen-Scratch saloon and sat down at one of the little tables. He looked around him curiously. The glory of the Hen-Scratch had departed. Nothing remained of the saloon but its name. There was dust upon the tables. The mirror behind the bar was written all over with the unedifying literature of soft drinks. There were no patrons in the place. A little yellow barkeeper was wiping glasses and trying to arrange grape-juice bottles in an enticing array upon his shelves, glancing up from his task at intervals to gaze into the tragic face of Abraham Lincoln, which looked out from a fly-specked frame hung crookedly upon the wall.

Skeeter Butts laid down a bottle which contained one of the softest of soft drinks, came from behind the bar, and murmured politely into the ear of the white man:

“Us ain’t sellin’ no drinks to white men, boss. Endurin’ of de barroom time, it wusn’t allowed. De law made us hab sep’rate barrooms fer de

whites an' blacks. Dar ain't no saloons no mo', but——"

"I ain't buying drinks," the white man answered. "I have no money, no credit, no friends, no business."

"Escuse me fer sayin' it, boss," Skeeter chuckled, "but dem is my fixes, an' you is mighty nigh as bad off as a nigger."

"I'm worse off than a nigger," the white man responded, and he seemed to get a lugubrious satisfaction from a realization of the fact. "More is expected of my race than of yours."

"Dat's right," Skeeter agreed. "Dey lets us blacks down easy; but neither de whites nor de blacks is up to expectations."

The white man sat for a while in deep thought. Skeeter noticed that the top of his head was overdeveloped, like an infant's; that his fingers were stained with cigarettes; that his clothes were of good material but badly worn. He decided that the man was an animated slosh in the desert of total abstinence, mourning the demise of John Barleycorn, and hopefully looking for a damp cloud on the horizon in the shape of a blind tiger.

Skeeter returned to his task of polishing glasses and wiping his bar, the habit acquired through twenty years of service to men who put one foot upon the brass rail. Meantime he watched the stranger from the corner of his eyes, and when the silence was prolonged he became nervous and

fidgety. At last the man came to the bar and spoke.

"Can you lend me ten dollars?"

In all Skeeter's varied career no such request had ever been uttered in his astonished ears. Skeeter wondered if this extraordinary thing was attributable to prohibition. Surely the old order changeth!

"I ain't know yo' favor or yo' face, an' I ain't met de 'quaintance of yo' name, boss," Skeeter replied.

"My name is Dick Nuhath," the white man responded promptly. "I am not altogether an honest man, but I am a gentleman. This is a request of one gentleman to another."

"I likes to 'commodate white gentlemens, boss," Skeeter said uneasily; "but I ain't got de ten dollars, an' so I cain't affode to lend it."

Without a word the man turned away, walked back to the table, and sat down. Once more there was a period of silence and deep meditation, while a nervous colored man polished glasses and watched the white man from the corner of his eye. Mr. Nuhath had the trick of sitting as motionless as a stone dog on a lawn, while even his eyes were fixed in a stony stare, oblivious to what went on around him and looking out across the spaces unseeingly.

"Dope!" Skeeter muttered to himself; but Skeeter was wrong.

There was twenty minutes of this ponderous thinking, and then the man came to Skeeter and made a proposition.

"I've got one thing I can sell, Skeeter. I rode to town on a horse that is worth one hundred dollars, intending to take him to Shongaloon, to enter him in the races at the fair; but I am broke. If you had lent me the ten dollars I would have gone on; but now, if I went, I would have no money to bet. So I am going to sell and go out of the racing business."

"You don't talk like no race-hoss man to me," Skeeter said.

"I ain't a race-horse man," was the reply. "I am a scholar and a gentleman."

"I ain't got no hundred dollars," Skeeter Butts said next. "Dar ain't no nigger in dis town wid dat much money in one lump. You'll have to sell out to de white folks."

"Couldn't you find ten colored people who had ten dollars each?" the white man asked. "All ten of you can own the horse, and when you make a win you can divide your earnings."

"What kind of hoss you got?" Skeeter asked with a new interest.

"He's a hard looker, Skeeter. He's a hound dog. He limps in all four feet, but not in all at the same time, you know. He swaps from one foot to the other. Every time he stops he goes lame in a different foot, because he can't remember

which foot he was limping on before. He has an awful short memory that way. You never can tell what foot he is going to cripple in next, and he don't know himself."

"Dat's a kind of trick hoss," Skeeter snickered.

"Exactly," Dick agreed. "I can make a killing with him at every race-track, for one look at him is aplenty. I can get all sorts of odds against him; but don't make any mistake, little yeller nigger—that horse can run!"

"Dat sounds good to me," Skeeter replied after a moment's thought. "How much do I git fer makin' de trade?"

"Get nine negroes to give you ten dollars each for the horse, and I'll be satisfied with the ninety dollars. That will give you a ten-dollar share in the animal without costing you a cent."

"Kin I try out de hoss an' see if he is all right?" Skeeter asked eagerly.

"Certainly."

"All right, boss," Skeeter replied. "I'll take you up!"

II

Skeeter staged his commercial transaction with some forethought. He chose nine negroes whom he knew to be possessed of ten dollars each, and asked them to meet him out at the old fair grounds. He got Little Bit, who was the colored jockey of Tickfall, to give the horse a try-out.

The Ten-Share Horse

In appearance, the horse was all the white man said he was, and more. He had a peculiar slinking gait, like a limp, sometimes in one foot, then in another. Often he seemed to be limping in all four feet at the same time.

The negroes howled in derision when Skeeter proposed to be one of ten to buy the animal. They examined his feet and made many comments, and finally proposed to bet Skeeter ten dollars that he could not tell what leg the horse would limp on the next time he started off.

But when Little Bit climbed on that horse the negroes stopped laughing. He could run like a jack-rabbit, and really had the jack-rabbit's peculiar springy, limpy gait.

"Dis hoss is a powerful funny pufformer," Conko Mukes howled; "but I puts my ten on him. He's a runner!"

"Who's gwine take keer of dis hoss whut belongs to us ten niggers?" Pap Curtain inquired.

"I'll keep him an' feed him," Skeeter answered. "I kin turn him in a big pasture dat belongs to Marse John Flournoy, an' Marse John won't ever know he's in de field. I'll feed him Marse John's oats and corn, an' dat white man won't ever miss it."

Two hours later Skeeter returned to the Hen-Scratch and handed Mr. Nuhat the sum of ninety dollars.

"I turned de hoss in de pasture back of de

sheriff's house," he volunteered. "Part of de trade wus dat I wus to take keer of de hoss. I reckon de tenth part dat I bought is de part whut eats."

"Would you be held responsible if anything happened to the animal?" Nuhat asked.

"Not onless he choked to death," Skeeter laughed. "I jes' takes keer of de eatin' end."

"I'm sorry I could not go on to Shongaloon," the white man said quietly. "There's a lot of good money to be picked up betting on that horse at the races."

"We'll slick him up an' git him feelin' good an' bet on him some ourselves," Skeeter said.

"Don't make him look too fit," Nuhat warned him. "That horse's looks get the odds against him. Nobody bets against something that looks like a winner."

A few minutes later the white man bought a package of cigarettes from Skeeter Butts, thanked him for the sale of the horse, and walked out.

Until midnight Skeeter was alone in the Hen-Scratch. No one came in to patronize his soft-drink emporium. The man was in the depths of despair. His place had always been the popular hang-out for all the plain loafers and fancy sons of rest. Now there were none so lazy as to enter a place which had nothing of its former attractiveness but a name.

"De niggers avoids dis place like it wus a pest-

house," Skeeter lamented to himself. "Ef I had about two hundred dollars I could start me a movin'-picture show fer colored only in dis little house, an' sell soft drinks on de side. Dat would fotch de crowd back, an' de men would bring de lady folks, an' I could git rid of a lot of ice-cream combs an' things like dat."

He smoked many cigarettes, lighting a fresh one on the stub of each old one, trying to think out a way to get some money for his new enterprise.

"Mebbe I could work some kind of flim-flam wid dat hoss," he sighed. "But I cain't make money very fast ef I got to 'vide up my profits by ten."

It had never occurred to Skeeter to question the white man's ownership of that horse, nor his right to dispose of it. The animal looked like just such an old skate as a broken-down race-horse man would own at the end of his track career. When a horseman retires from the turf, he generally has something like that to get rid of.

Skeeter did not get to his home on Sheriff John Flournoy's premises until midnight. He did not go to see his new horse until the next morning at feeding-time.

When he went to the pasture, he found that a gap was broken in the fence and the horse was gone.

"We better hunt dat hoss befo' he gits too fur away," Skeeter said to himself. "I reckon he's

gone back home; but I don't know whar his home is at, an' I ain't know which way to look fer him."

Two hours later all ten owners of the animal were searching for him. Such a task was hopeless at the start, for the animal could go into the swamp in any direction around Tickfall and disappear forever. A strange animal, like a strange man, seldom came out of that jungle if he entered it alone.

The ten men made a circle of the town, walking on the edge of the swamp, looking for tracks. They were experienced in reading signs, but they could not find a place where an animal had entered the jungle. Concluding that the horse had kept in some beaten path, they separated, each following a winding trail in the great hot-house of the morass, slimy with rusty-colored oily water, and all acrawl with repulsive form of insect and animal life.

At noon they all met at the broken place in the fence where the horse had escaped. The ground was soft, and yet they could find no hoof-tracks leading from the field to the highroad.

They did not know that Dick Nuhat had tied some cotton bagging under each hoof of his limpy horse before he led him through the gap.

About ten o'clock that night, Conko Mukes, entered the Hen-Scratch saloon.

"Skeeter, I come to git my money back," he said. "I done decided not to buy no race-hoss."

"You cain't git yo' money back," Skeeter said. "De white man took all our dollars wid him, an' now our hoss done eloped away."

"I don't know no white man," Conko Mukes said belligerently. "I never seen no white man. I ain't saw nobody but you, didn't make no trade wid nobody but you, an' I got a mighty shawt look at dat hoss whut I paid my good ten dollars fer. Now I's lookin' to you!"

"I got a mighty little look, too," Skeeter said placatingly. "I ain't got a real good recollection of whut dat hoss looked like. I ain't real shore I'd know him in de road ef he didn't limp none."

"I ain't buyin' no absent hoss," Conko said. "I want my money back!"

"But de white man is got our money," Skeeter explained again. "You won't git yo' money onless you finds de white man; an' he'll be harder to find dan de hoss. You had a look at de hoss, but you never saw de white man whut sold it."

"I ain't seein' nobody but you," Conko Mukes remarked in a hard tone. "I gived you my money an' you tuck it, an' you is de mighty nigh white man whut is got to give it back!"

"I ain't got no money!" Skeeter Butts wailed.

"Git it!" Conko Mukes barked.

With this command he drew a large pistol from a holster under his left arm and laid it on the table with the business end pointing toward Skeeter Butts.

Skeeter turned almost white. Conko had the reputation of having killed several men, and Skeeter had no desire to be commemorated by the next notch carved on the butt of his gun.

He rose hastily to his feet and started toward the little safe in the corner of the barroom. Conko followed him, his big gun punching at a spot between Skeeter's shoulder blades, which turned cold as ice from the contact of the steel. Conko was not sure whether Skeeter was going after money or a gun.

The trembling barkeeper stooped and opened the little door of his safe. He took out the only ten dollars he had in the world and thrust it into Conko's hands.

"Good-by, Skeeter," Conko grinned. "Dat wus a very narrer escapement fer you. I done kilt plenty niggers fer less money!"

III

The next day Skeeter faced bankruptcy.

Conko possessed the gift of expression and liked to talk. He exhibited the ten dollars he had secured from Skeeter, boasted of the forcible methods he used to extract it from the barkeeper's roll, and started eight others to planning how they also could get their money back.

The Rev. Vinegar Atts called early, and brought Conko Mukes with him.

"I wants my money back, Skeeter!" he howled. "Conko an' me been talkin' it over. He specifies dat I kin come an' shoot off my mouth, an' he'll be handy to shoot off his gun; but I hopes dat ain't needful to pussuade you to do yo' Christyum duty an' hand my dollars back. Ef you don't see it dat way, I kin do de tongue-lashin' an' Conko kin do de razor-slashin'. How soon is you gwine hand over my ten?"

"I ain't got no tenner, Vinegar," Skeeter said nervously. "Conko will tell you dat he got my las' dollar."

"Git some mo' dollars!" Vinegar shouted. "Dat hoss white man muss hab 'vided up dat money wid you. I wants mine back!"

"You got to gimme time," Skeeter said desperately. "I's tellin' you de noble truth when I says I ain't got it."

Vinegar turned around and looked at Conko significantly. The brave fighter stepped into the ring and shook a pugilistic fist under Skeeter's twitching nose.

"Lawdymussy, niggers!" Skeeter wailed. "Gimme a little time to hunt dat hoss. You oughter trust me till I kin find him."

"Us done spent a day huntin' fer dat hoss," Conko said inexorably. "It didn't git us nothin'. Now you pay Vinegar's money back an' take yo' time huntin' dat hoss, an' when you finds him you will own my tenth an' Vinegar's tenth an' yo'

tenth of dat hoss. Three limpy legs will b'long to you."

Skeeter made a few more feeble protests; but when he saw that Conko was preparing to flash the old familiar weapon, he surrendered finally. Going to his little safe, to his cash-drawer, and raking his pockets of every coin, he managed to scrape together the sum required, in pitiful little pindling amounts—ten cents here and two bits there.

"Dar it am," Skeeter lamented. "I done squoze out my last nickel. I hopes you-alls will take pity on me, an' not tell nobody dat I paid you back. De nex' feller dat claims his money will have to take my pants!"

"He'll either take yo' pants or git his money outen yo' hide," Conko laughed unfeelingly, as the two men walked out of the saloon.

One hour later Figger Bush and Shin Bone entered the place and drew Skeeter off to a corner of the room.

"Us wants our money back, Skeeter!" was the familiar greeting.

"I ain't got no money," was Skeeter's old lamentation.

Followed a long argument, ending with threats. Skeeter pleaded and prayed until he saw that the two were clearing for action, and once more he quit.

"I ain't got no money, men," he said desper-

ately, throwing his arms wide in a hopeless gesture. "Jes' look aroun' you an' he'p yo'selves to de Hen-Scratch."

"I takes a fancy to dat grassyphome," Figger replied promptly. "I always did like free music, an' dat machine will sound real good in my cabin, wid me settin' on one side smokin' my pipe an' Scootie settin' on de yuther side, dippin' snuff."

"Take it!" Skeeter wailed.

"Dis here slop-machine whar you draps in a penny an' gits out a stick of chaw-gum will go good in my resteraw," Shin Bone remarked.

"Take it!" Skeeter lamented. "I'm a blowed-up sucker!"

After these men departed, Skeeter did not have long to wait before another caller arrived. It was Pap Curtain. He bit off the end of a cigar and gazed intently into the little barkeeper's gloomy face.

"You owes me ten dollars, Skeeter," he began.

"I knowed dat as soon as I seen you, Pap," Skeeter sighed. "I admits dat I owes you. I promises to pay you as soon as I kin; but I ain't got de money now. Ef you'll jes' only go away 'thout talkin', you'll make me happy."

Pap took off his hat and laid it upon the table, where they were sitting. He took his cigar from his mouth and placed it on the table so that the lighted end projected a little over the edge. Then he drew a chair close to Skeeter and laid a horny

finger upon Skeeter's knee for emphasis. Evidently Skeeter was not to be made happy.

Pap's baboon face, with its snarling voice and lips, carried its continual sneer. He possessed the conversational facilities of Bildad the Shuhite.

First he coaxed, wheedled, begged, and implored. Then he argued and expounded, reviewed and reiterated, discussed details and recapitulated, presenting the whole matter from the broadest possible standpoint; but he found it hard to persuade money out of Skeeter, for the reason that Skeeter had none. The cupboard was bare.

Then he mentioned the possibility of a final and absolute refusal on Skeeter's part to restore the ten dollars wrongfully acquired, and explained the inevitable consequences. At this point he put on what the negroes call the "rousements," and yapped like a poodle. Reaching his peroration, he found that decent language bent and broke beneath the burden of his meaning, so he "cussed."

"I got only two boxes of seegaws in my little show case, Pap," Skeeter said, when the vocal pyrotechnics subsided into a feeble splutter of hot ashes. "Take 'em an' git out! Dey is wuth mo' dan ten dollars, but I gib 'em to you. Fer Gawd's sake git out!"

Evidently Conko Mukes was waiting outside until Pap finished. The swinging doors of the saloon had not ceased to vibrate after Pap before

Conko pushed them wide and entered the room with the clumsy gait of a bear.

"I got four friends dat is app'inted me to colleck fawty dollars Skeeter!" he bellowed. "Dey promises me ten pussent per each fer my trouble in collectin'. Dat'll be fo' dollars fer me."

"Jes' take whutever you wants an' call it even," Skeeter said in a lifeless voice. "I been agonizin' all de mawnin', an' I craves to got de agony over."

"I don't want no secont-hand bar-fixtures," Conko laughed hoarsely. "Barrooms is gone out of style. I wants de spot cash paid in my hand. Gimme yo' money or yo' life!"

"You know I ain't got no money," Skeeter wailed. "Cain't you take somepin I got in dis saloom?"

"Naw!" Conko bawled. "I cain't colleck no ten pussent of no brass foot-rail or pool-table. I wants de cash!"

Up to this moment the day had been one of great humiliation. Now began a period in which Skeeter showed a marvelous mental versatility.

There was no way for him to pay back that forty dollars except to borrow it, and no one to borrow from but the white folks. He had to tell a different story to each white man in order to start the fountain of his generosity and secure the loan. And through the whole day of frenzied effort to meet the demands upon him, there was the haunting fear that the horse had wandered off and would never be seen again.

Early the next morning Skeeter started out to hunt his horse. Having bought it and paid for it, he wanted it. His search was futile, and when he returned to Shin Bone's restaurant for his noon-day meal he was loud in his protestations of woe.

"De white man whut sold you dat hoss went to de pasture an' stole him out an' tuck him away," Shin Bone told him. "Instid of huntin' dat hoss, you oughter git de sheriff on de trail of dat white man."

"But de fence wus broke down," Skeeter protested stupidly. "Dat shows dat de hoss got out by hisself."

"Ef I wus gwine steal a hoss, I'd break down de fence so de folks would think de hoss got out," was the reply.

This was a new idea to Skeeter, who really had not given much thought to his predicament. He carried this dark suspicion for the rest of the day, still hunting his horse, but devoid of all hope of finding it.

"Dat white man rode dat hoss to town, sold him to me, an' rode him out of town," he sighed pitifully. "Yet dat feller looked to me like a tolerable nice man. He stressified dat he warn't honest, but he specified dat he was a puffleck gentlemun. I ain't never gwine he'p a white man agin!"

He thought of the forty dollars he had borrowed from the white folks and had to pay back. The

profits from his little business were extremely small and growing less. The repayment of the borrowed money meant close economy for a long time.

"I feels powerful sorry fer myself," he wailed.

Wronged, abused, depressed, and hopeless, he returned to the Hen-Scratch saloon. When he entered he gasped for breath.

Dick Nuhat was sitting at one of the little tables, in an attitude of deep and solemn meditation, as motionless as a stone dog.

IV

Skeeter sat down at the same table and opened his mouth to deliver his mind of all its burden of trouble; but the white man put such a successful cloture on the colored man's oratory that Skeeter could not speak a word for a long time.

Nuhat thrust both hands into his pockets and brought them out full of silver and currency. He did not speak a word of greeting. He merely laid the money on the top of the table and watched Skeeter's popping eyes.

"You ought to have been at the races, Skeeter," Nuhat said at last. "We mopped up!"

Skeeter needed no proof of this beyond the table-top covered with money; but even yet he could not find a word to say.

"There is over six hundred dollars of it that says we win, Skeeter," Nuhat laughed.

"Whut hoss win?" Skeeter asked with stiff lips.

"Your horse," Nuhat replied. "Don't you remember that you bought a horse? Your ten-share nigger horse that I sold you. I sneaked him out of the pasture, took him to Shongaloon to the races, and mopped up this money."

"I been huntin' fer dat hoss eve'ywhar," Skeeter sighed. "I shore missed him. I's had a lot of trouble 'bout dat hoss!"

"You won't ever see him again," Nuhat responded.

"How come?"

Nuhat hesitated a minute, looking sharply at Skeeter. He seemed undecided what to say in reply, but finally ventured:

"I didn't own that horse in the first place. That horse's real name is Springer, and its real owner is Old Griff."

Skeeter opened his eyes until they were like china door-knobs. He wondered why he had not recognized the most famous race-horse in Louisiana, named Springer because of his peculiar springy gait.

"I borrowed Springer from Old Griff's stable without requesting the loan of him," Nuhat continued. "Old Griff came to Shongaloon after him. He was real nice about it, after I had talked to him about four hours. At first he wanted to put me in jail for horse-stealing."

"My Lawd, white man!" Skeeter ranted. "Dat wus a awful risky thing to do. Glory to gracious! To think dat a nigger like me one time owned three-tenths of Springer—fo'-tenths—my Lawd, I owned all of him, fer dem niggers made me give deir money back!"

"That's some glory for you, Skeeter!" Nuhat assured him.

"How come dat Old Griff didn't put you in de jail-house?" the colored man asked.

"I had four quarts of prime Kentucky whisky when I started in this adventure. I took it with me to placate Old Griff when he caught me with the goods. It worked. Toward the end of the second quart he offered to make me a present of the horse."

"You means to say all dis money is yourn?" Skeeter asked, waving his hand over the table.

"It's ours," Nuhat replied. "I came back to whack up even with you."

"Bless Gawd fer a noble white man!" Skeeter exclaimed. "How come you tuck a notion to come back here to me?"

"I might have kept on traveling," the white man said meditatively, choosing his words cautiously; "but I wanted to have friends in Tickfall in case Old Griff sobered up and began to trail his horse and ask questions along the way. Besides, down at the bottom of me, I'm honest, or want to be."

He counted out ninety dollars and handed it to Skeeter.

"This don't go into the divide," he explained. "This is the sum you originally invested in our business enterprise. The rest is ours—not honestly acquired, perhaps; but I was up against it, and had to have some coin."

They had five hundred and forty dollars to divide between them. When Skeeter sat fondling two hundred and seventy dollars, Nuhat asked with a smile:

"What you going to do with your money?"

Skeeter took a big breath and sighed in happy anticipation.

"I leaves on de midnight train fer N'Awleens, an' I stays dar till I gits dis money well spent. I'll see de nigger shows, ride on all de street-cars, eat hot roasted peanuts, travel up 'n' down on de yellervators, chaw beefsteak two inches thick, an' buy me a derby hat an' a suit of clothes wid so many colors dat when I walks up Canal Street de white folks will think de lightning done struck de rainbow!"

"I'm going to buy a steamboat," Nuhat said musingly. "Thirty feet long, eighteen feet wide, floating on top of the water like a cigar-box, propelled by a paddle-wheel about as big as a barrel, with a little donkey six-snort-power engine. It has a speed of six miles an hour down-stream, if the current is good. Going up-stream, it gets there when it can."

"Huh!" Skeeter grunted.

"It costs two hundred dollars," Nuhat continued. "I expect to live and die on that boat. I love to sit and think!"

"Ain't you gwine do nothing but think?" Skeeter asked, to whom such an occupation was utterly foreign and beyond his comprehension.

"Yes—I'm going to turn honest. Everybody will know me as a good white man."

"White folks is diffunt from niggers in deir notions of havin' fun," Skeeter said meditatively. "Turnin' honest an' thinkin' don't look like a awful good time to me!"

"I understand," Nuhat replied. "A negro has a one-cylinder mind and a smoky spark-plug."

"But dat good time I plans don't sep'rate me from mo' dan fifty dollars of my money," Skeeter proclaimed. "De rest goes todes startin' me in de movie bizness. De nex' time you steals a hoss an' rides through Tickfall, you'll see Skeeter in charge of a fust-rate nigger movin'-picture show."

When the midnight train arrived, Skeeter was on the platform, bidding good-by to Tickfall with a happy face.

The news of his sudden rise to prosperity had spread with amazing rapidity through the colored portions of the town. No one knew the details, but all heard that the horse Skeeter bought had won a fortune at the races. Nine men were sorely distressed that they had treated Skeeter so shabbily and had disposed of their shares of the horse.

Just as the train started, nine negroes came running across the station platform. Pap Curtain was waving two boxes of cigars, Figger Bush was wildly gesticulating with the horn of his "grassyphome," and the others were holding out their hands with money.

Conko Mukes ran along the station platform, clinging to the steps of the moving train, waving a ten-dollar bill, and speaking in pleading tones.

"I wants to buy my share of dat hoss agin, Skeeter!"

The train was gaining headway, and Skeeter leaned over, pretending he could not hear what was said.

"I wants to buy my share of de hoss back!" Conko bellowed, for he had to run now to keep up with the moving train.

Skeeter grasped the hand-rail on each side of him and kicked out with all the strength of his body.

The toe of his boot struck Conko Mukes on the point of the chin. The man staggered, stumbled, and fell as a rotten log falls in the forest. Eight of his friends stubbed their toes on him, stepped on him, fell on him, then picked him up, brushed off his clothes, and led him away.

The train moved through the darkness like a long serpent with shining, jeweled sides. Skeeter entered the car and sat down, smiling.

A Chariot of Fire

I

SKY PILOT

THE man traveling through the Louisiana swamps is often appalled by the deathlike stillness of the woods.

Slimy creatures crawl in the muck under his feet without a croak or hiss. Gaudy birds fly from living trees to dead, gaunt stumps without a note of music. The fox and wolf which sometimes make the woods vocal with their barking, slink away at the approach of man in silence. The whole place seems to be engaged in the deepest conspiracy to accomplish something which the slightest sound would disturb or frustrate.

Generally, a negro walking through the woods alone will bawl a song at the top of his voice. For some reason he feels that there is safety in sound, just as the Chinaman beats a tin pan to chase the devil away. But no negro ever has the courage to shatter one of these conspiracies of silence when he finds it in the swamp. If every-

thing else begins to make a racket, he will, too. But he won't start anything.

Which accounts for the fact that two negroes, not two hundred yards apart, were walking through the Little Moccasin Swamp, and were unaware of each other's presence.

One negro was troubled. He stopped, removed his high silk hat, and mopped the sweat from the top of his bald head. He lowered his head and listened, then he raised his head and listened. For a moment he thought he heard something, then he found the silence more intense than ever.

"Dar's somepin gittin' ready to happen aroun' dis woods," he whispered to himself. "I been listenin' in dese here swamps all my life, but I ain't never heard no sound like dat ontill now."

He squatted behind a stump and peered anxiously about him. Great trees of the primeval forest reared themselves above him, skirted and frocked like a Druid priest with the funereal moss. Under the wide-spreading branches of these trees long corridors ran in every direction like the floral avenues through some giant hot-house conservatory. Nothing moved, no sound could be heard under those majestic arches of the forest.

The negro stooped and placed his ear to the ground. He had heard an express train at a long distance, and the sound he was hearing at intervals was something like that. But he knew it was twenty miles to the nearest railroad which carried

a train which could travel fast enough to make a similar sound. He had also heard a wolf-pack coming through the forest on one occasion, and that *pad-pad-pad* of their flying feet was not dissimilar in sound to what he was hearing. He was also familiar with the herds of wild hogs which infested the Little Moccasin, and when they were moving rapidly at a long distance the sound would be like the persistent thrumming he could dimly hear.

"Whutever dat is, 'tain't hittin' de groun' wid its foots," he announced to himself, as he glanced up about him with fear-shot eyes. "Dis here nigger is gittin' ready to vacate hissself from dis swamp."

He glanced up at the sky. It was as clear as a soap bubble. The haze of the evening was settling upon the tree-tops like a veil of purple and gold under the setting sun. He was looking for the signs of the sudden storms which blow in from the Gulf, and he sniffed the air for the odor of smoke from a forest fire.

"'Tain't no fire, an' it ain't no cycaloon storm," he muttered.

He turned and walked rapidly down the little foot-path, still listening, but now more interested in getting out of the darkening woods than in locating the source of the sound. Suddenly he heard the noise so loud and distinct that his next guess was nearer than he dreamed.

"Dat's a automobile engyne!" he chattered, the goose-flesh rising all over his body. Then he shook his head in mute denial of his assertion. The nearest public highroad was ten miles away.

"Not even a skeart nigger preacher kin hear ten miles," he muttered. "An' nobody but de debbil could run a automobile in dese here woods whar dar ain't no road!"

The thought brought him to a quick halt. Suppose the devil were loose in these woods, riding around in a flivver or straddle of a motor-cycle, seeking whom he might devour?

"I don't crave to meet de debbil," the colored clergyman murmured, as he reached up for his stovepipe hat and grasped it firmly in his fingers.

"I done slanderized the debbil too frequent in my sermons!"

He turned his face until his eyes looked straight into the face of the setting sun, and he began to leave the scenery of the swamp behind him. He did not run. No man can run as fast as the Rev. Vinegar Atts was traveling.

And Vinegar knew where he was going. In the very heart of that Little Moccasin Swamp was the Moccasin prairie. It was an open space containing nearly a square mile of ground without a tree or stump. It was completely surrounded by water, and two years before a raging forest fire had left it a charred ground strewn with ash and soot. Now it was covered with grass and was

as smooth as a baseball diamond. Vinegar was including that open space in his route toward Tick-fall because he could travel across it with ease and speed.

Suddenly every winged creature of the swamp broke the silence and became vocal with screams of fright. Hundreds of wild pigeons rose in the air and began to describe mad circles over the head of the running negro. From all the watercourses rose the wild fowls that love the low, damp marshes, and they sailed upward with hoarse shrieks of fear. The angry, fighting, barklike call of the hawks, mingled with the scream of eagles, and these fearless birds sailed straight into the glowing red eye of the sun to meet the peril that was coming.

Vinegar Atts could not see because he was blinded by the sun. But soon a roar sounded above him like the exhaust of an automobile, and Vinegar looked up.

An airplane was climbing the pathless air in long, spiral flight directly over his head—the first flying-machine that the Rev. Vinegar Atts had ever seen. Its long wings were tipped as with fire by the rays of the setting sun. Beneath it the screaming birds sailed wildly, madly, performing all sorts of aerial stunts.

Vinegar dropped on his knees, with his arms stretched up toward the graceful creation of man's brain and hands. A few phrases from his old,

worn Bible came to his mind, and he bellowed them at the top of his voice, as he listened to the exhaust of that great motor.

"Like de noise of chariots on de top of mountains, like de noise of a flame of fire dat devoureth de stubble—all faces shall gather blackness—dey shall run like mighty men——"

The birds scattered far and wide over the swamp. There was a great silence. Vinegar opened his eyes, and lo, the airplane was sailing slowly downward.

"My Gawd!" Vinegar howled. "De chariot of fire!"

Thereupon he fulfilled the prophecy of the Book of Joel, and rose from the ground and "ran like a mighty man."

The airplane settled upon the edge of the Moccasin prairie. A young man dismounted from the machine, glanced at it critically, then took a survey of the sky with a rather furtive eye, and turned with an air of decision and disappeared in the swamp.

Then a strange negro stepped to the edge of the clearing, waited until he was sure that the airman was not going to return, and walked over to the machine.

"Dat white man is done got enough flyin' an' he's drapped dis car down here fer good," he decided. "Dis am four miles from Tickfall, an' ef dat white man had wanted to land anywise nigh he could hab done it."

He stood scratching his head and pondering.

"Naw, suh," he concluded. "Dat white man is done lost dis here flyin'-machine. He lost it a puppus. He ain't never comin' back fer it."

Sniffing at the taint of hot oil which spoiled the rich odors of the woods, the strange negro wandered on toward Tickfall, his nose in the air.

Incidentally he had some plans in the air.

II

THREE MEN

Three men left the landing place of the airplane and started for Tickfall, four miles away.

The Rev. Vinegar Atts arrived first because he was in a hurry, and ran every step. He staggered into the Hen-Scratch saloon in the last stages of physical exhaustion, and dropped down in a chair beside a table.

Three negroes sprang to their feet, terrified by the colored clergyman's appearance and manner.

"Whut ails you, Vinegar?" Skeeter Butts exclaimed. "You look like you done been run by a ha'nt!"

"Wusser 'n dat, nigger," Vinegar panted, as he wiped the copious perspiration from his bald head, and reached out a trembling hand for the reviving drink which Figger Bush had thoughtfully brought

him. "I done seen a chariot of fire come straight down from de glory of de Lawd!"

Hitch Diamond glanced at the empty glass, and then nodded significantly to Skeeter Butts.

"Don't gib him any more, Skeeter," he suggested. "De revun is done had too many drams already."

"'Tain't so," Vinegar grunted. "I ain't drunk. I'm seein'—things!"

"I ketch on," Hitch chuckled. "I done seen things in my day, too. I seen a purple elerphunt wunst. I wus settin' on de side of a puffleckly straight wall ticklin' one of dese here ukuleles. Whar you been at? Whut else did you see?"

"Been out in de swamp. Seen a chariot of fire come down outen de sky. I heard it zoonin' fer a long time—sounded like a automobile. All de birds in de woods flew up to see it, an' squalled like dey wus skeart to death. It lit out in de Little Moccasin prairie."

"Whut happened when she lit?" Figger Bush inquired.

"I didn't stay to see," Vinegar sighed. "Fer a fack, I wus makin' myse'f absent befo' she lit."

Suddenly Skeeter Butts began to laugh. He slapped his brown hand upon his thigh and cackled like a hen. The more he laughed the funnier something got to him.

"I knows whut ails Vinegar, brudders," he snickered. "He's done see a——"

Skeeter's assertion paused in midair, because the door of the Hen-Scratch saloon was pushed open, and the second man had arrived from Moccasin prairie.

This man was a stranger, and was built on circular lines, round head, round eyes, round face, round body. His character and modes of thought and action also followed curved lines. There was nothing straight about him.

"Good evenin', brudders," he greeted them. "My name am Red Cutt. Kin you-alls tell me whut town dis is?"

"How come you don't know whar you is at?" Skeeter asked suspiciously.

"I jes' landed," Red Cutt remarked simply.

"Didn't de train cornductor tell you whar you wus gittin' off?" Hitch Diamond rumbled. "Or mebbe you rid de brake rods?"

"Naw, suh," Red Cutt replied smilingly. "I rode through de air."

"Gimme somepin to hold on to, niggers," Figger Bush snickered, as he sat down with pretended weakness in a chair and grasped the legs of the table. "Here's one nigger whut says he seen a chariot of fire, and here comes a secont nigger whut says he took a ride in it."

"'Twarn't no chariot of fire," Cutt said easily. "It was a air-ship. Didn't none of you niggers ever see no airplane?"

"Suttinly," Skeeter Butts answered. "I done

seen a millyum of 'em in N'Awleens. But you is de fust cullud aviator I's seen."

"Dar ain't many in de worl'," Cutt said quietly. "I reckon I'm about de fust nigger flier in de worl'."

"Listen to dat," Vinegar Atts exploded. "Ef I hadn't been so skeart I'd 'a' had good comp'ny back to town."

"Wus you de brudder dat wus bellerin' so loud?" Cutt inquired. "I heard somebody, but I couldn't locate 'em. I couldn't find no good landin' place close to town. I wus skeart I'd tear up a lot of fences an' telegram poles ef I landed in Tickfall. I wus skeart I'd hab to pay fer 'em. So I landed out in de swamp."

"Dat wus right," Figger Bush laughed. "No Tickfall niggers, excusin' Skeeter Butts, is got to see a air-ship, an' I b'lieves dat Skeeter is lyin'. Ef you'd landed in town, all us Tickfalls would hab fell in a well or run ourselves to death."

At this moment the green-baize doors of the saloon were pushed open and a white man entered. The third man had arrived in Tickfall.

At first glance he appeared to be a mechanic. His hands were large, black with the grime of machinery, and hard. His face and clothes were streaked with grease. The skin of his face had been whipped by the air until it was tanned like leather.

"Good evenin' boss," Skeeter exclaimed, stand-

ing up and taking the stranger in at a glance. "Er—dis here is a cullud bar, an' us cain't serve de white——"

"I don't want a drink," the young man answered. "I want some information. Do any of you know where Mr. Arsene Chieniere lives?"

There was silence for a moment, then Vinegar interpreted:

"He means Mr. Arson Shinny!"

"O—suttinly, suh," Skeeter exclaimed. "He lives right straight out dis road whut goes in front of dis saloon. I seen Miss Jew-ann Shinny pass here to-day—gwine todes home."

"Miss Juan?" the young man asked, giving the beautiful Latin pronunciation, and speaking the word like a caress.

"Dat's de lady," Skeeter answered. "Dey lives ten miles out on dis here road."

"Where can I hire a flivver to take me out there?"

"I's de only taxi-man in town," Skeeter said, as he reached for his cap. "I'll take you out dar in twenty minutes fer two dollars."

"Get busy," the young man answered, as he sat down to wait.

The other three negroes sat whispering to each other for a few minutes, then Vinegar inquired:

"Beg pardon, boss; ain't you a railroad man?"

"Yes," the stranger answered, with a barely perceptible hesitation.

"I knowed it," Vinegar chuckled. "I bet Miss Jew-ann Shinny is gwine be glad to see you!"

"I'll go to see now," the young man smiled, as he heard Skeeter's machine at the door.

III

"MISS JEW-ANN"

It was not possible for Skeeter Butts to keep his mouth shut for twenty minutes, and the young man beside him, as he watched the long sandy road roll under the machine like a brown ribbon, was equally willing to talk.

"Is you-alls kin to de Shinnys?" Skeeter asked.

"No."

"Gwine dar on bizzness?"

"No—yes."

"Dar ain't nobody at dat house to do bizzness wid excusin' Mr. Shinny an' Miss Jew-ann." No answer. "Which one am you doin' bizzness wid, boss?"

"Which one do you think?"

"Of co'se, I'm jes' guessin'—but ef I wus a white man I'd shore crave to talk bizzness wid de lady."

"That's what I'm here for," the stranger laughed.

"I done got you located now, boss," Skeeter chuckled delightedly. "You is courtin'."

They turned suddenly to the left and ran into

a dark road which lead through a section of the Little Moccasin Swamp. The wheels began to slip in the mire and Skeeter gave his entire attention to his automobile to prevent stalling in the mud. At last they reached firmer ground, and Skeeter returned to the conversation.

"Of co'se, I ain't axin' you fer no job, boss, but I's been powerful assistance to a whole passel of young white mens dat's come courtin' in dis country."

"What special help can you render?" the stranger asked.

"Expe'unce an' conversation," Skeeter replied promptly. "I done courted 'bout a millyum womens my own self, an' I knows all de funny curves dey tries on. I gives exputt advice to all de niggers dat marries in Tickfall. I ain't no marrifyin' man myse'f, but I favors it an' he'ps it along."

"How can you render assistance through your conversation?" the young man smiled.

"Gosh, white man! You ain't never done no courtin' in de South, is you? Eve'y white man whut goes courtin' hires a nigger to go wid him."

"What for?"

"I see you don't know nothin'," Skeeter chuckled. "I esplains dis fack; eve'y white lady dat is wuth courtin' is got some nigger gal wuckin' fer her in de kitchen. Eve'y white man whut onderstan's courtin' hires a nigger boy to go wid

him an' wait on him while he courts de lady. Now, dat nigger boy goes into de kitchen an' tells dat nigger gal whut a allfired good ketch fer de white lady his boss am—an' de nigger gal tells dat nigger boy whut a histidious, highfalutin lady her mistiss is, an' dat arrangement he'ps courtin' long an' does a large amount of great good."

The young man laughed, and Skeeter bent over his wheel, watching the road for stumps as his machine plowed through some high marsh grass.

"Now, I always gives my white man a good recommend at defust off-startin'," Skeeter continued. "I tells de nigger gal my white folks don't drink none, don't gamble none, is got plenty money, owns a big plantation, and hires plenty niggers. When us mens goes home, dat nigger gal tells her mistiss whut I said about her gen'leman friend. Don't you think dat's a good arrangement?"

"I don't know," the young man said dubiously, as they ran into a clearing and stopped in front of a wide-spreading farmhouse. "I'll wait and see. I like to talk for myself, but I might need you yet."

"I hope so, boss," Skeeter smiled as he pocketed the two dollars which the young man extended. "You want me to wait fer you?"

"No."

"Want me to come back fer you?"

"No."

"A'right. Ef you needs me, jes' ax fer Skeeter

Butts. I's got a good name 'mongst de white and de blacks."

Miss Juan Chieniere sat upon the wide, white portico and watched, as the white man dismounted from the machine. She watched until Skeeter had turned and started back the way he had come. She watched the young man turn and enter the gate. All of this with indifference, which suddenly turned to an interest, which left her gasping with delight.

"Oh—Jim!"

The Frenchwoman makes the most fascinating sweetheart and the most attractive wife in the world, to all except a blind man. To all the other things which the Frenchwoman possesses in common with her sisters, she adds the charm of manner. In other words, when she loves a man, she shows it! The glance of the eye, the quiver of the lips, the gesture of her hands, these things speak for her and plead for her and pray for her!

"Oh—Jim!" she repeated.

"I told you I was coming," was all that Jim said.

"But—how did you get here, Jim?"

"I flew through the air like a bird, just like I told you I would."

Her hand motioned him to a seat by her side, and every posture of her body, as she moved aside to give him space, bespoke a welcome without words.

"Where did you get the airplane, Jim?" she questioned.

"I stole it," Jim answered frankly. "I stole it from the government of the United States. It's an army airplane, designed to strafe the Huns. I just hopped in, shot the juice to her, and flew seventy miles to see you!"

"Holy Mother!" the girl exclaimed tragically. "What will they do to you for that crime?"

"I should worry—they haven't caught me yet. Besides, I've got a whale of a lie fixed up to tell them."

"Let me hear your lie, Jimmy," the girl fluttered. "I'll be scared to death while you are here, unless the lie is a real good one, and will save you if you get caught."

Jim hesitated a moment while he reached for his cigarette-case. The girl took the match from his fingers, struck it into flame, and held it to his cigarette, thus lighting his face and her own in the gathering dusk.

"Whew," he whistled, as his hungry eyes devoured the beauty of her face. "It would have been worth it if I had stolen a whole squadron of war-ships to come to see you in."

"Tell me the beautiful alibi lie, Jimmy," the girl insisted.

"You can't appreciate the value of a lie until you know the truth," Jimmy began, inhaling his cigarette smoke. "The truth is this: I have been

in the aviation camp for eighteen months without a chance of getting leave of absence to come to see you. The only chance I have ever had to talk has been on your visits to your brother at the camp, and those opportunities have been too few. Now, I am an expert airplane mechanic, and in repairing machines I am permitted to try them out before brave aviators like your brother are permitted to risk their valuable lives in them. So this afternoon I repaired a machine and took a trial flight which has extended for seventy miles, and which ended just about four miles from Tick-fall, and ten miles by automobile from you. I came here to see you because I love you, and before I go back I expect your promise to marry me!"

"Oh, how perfectly glorious!" the girl exclaimed. "That's the truth! Now, tell me the beautiful lie!"

"When I go back to the camp I shall tell them that I started out on a trial flight, and had engine trouble; had to land in the heart of these great Louisiana swamps, and lost my bearings. I shall tell them I spent two days wandering in the wilderness like the children of Israel before I found a human habitation. There I got help, made my repairs, and hurried back!"

"That's fine, Jimmy!" Juan exclaimed. "But will they believe it?"

"I don't know. If you think it is too risky,

suppose you promise to marry me right now, and let me hurry back?"

"You're joking, now, Jimmy," the girl answered promptly. "You must save your lies and jokes till you get back to camp. Maybe they'll believe them."

The door opened, and a handsome gentleman stepped out upon the porch.

"Father," the girl said, as they both rose to their feet, "this is Mr. James Gannaway, from the aviation camp where brother is."

"I welcome you, young man," Mr. Chieniere exclaimed cordially. "I wish you were my son come in from the camp."

"I wish so, too," Jim said simply, and his words held a meaning which the father did not get.

IV

THE FLYING CLUB

When Skeeter Butts returned to the Hen-Scratch saloon, he found his three friends at the table, listening with the most intense interest to the speech of the stranger recently arrived among them, Red Cutt.

They were so intent upon his words that Skeeter regretted his absence from the saloon. He felt that he had missed something of the utmost importance, for he had never seen his three friends

more excited than they were at that particular moment. Skeeter paused at the door and listened. Red Cutt was speaking.

"De fust time I ever saw anybody go up in de air wus at a county fair. Dar wus a balloon tied on de end of a rope, an' a white man wus in charge, and he let eve'ybody whut had a dollar go up in de air as fur as de rope went."

"How many foots could you go up?" Vinegar inquired.

"One thousand foots," Red Cutt informed him. "Dat is as fur as de rope stretched. Of co'se if de rope broke, I imagines a nigger might hab went a heap farther, but dey wouldn't charged him nothin' fer dat extry trip."

"An' did you go up in it?" Hitch Diamond asked.

"Naw, I didn't hab no dollar; but I made up my mind right dar dat some day I wus gwine up."

Skeeter Butts joined the company at this point, sat down and lighted a cigarette, leaned back and asked with great nonchalance:

"How long has you been tryin' to fly, Brudder Red Cutt?"

"I been at it for the last 'leven or twelve months. Is you had any expe'unce flyin'?"

"Naw, suh, I ain't had much to speak about," Skeeter Butts replied. "Of co'se, I took a few little flies when I wus in de army, but I didn't run de machine myself, an' I don't know very much about it."

"I'm glad to hear you say dat, Skeeter," Red Cutt responded. "You see, my bizzness jes' now is travelin' through de country teachin' cullud folks how to fly dese machines. De gover'ment of the Nunited States is makin' about a million of deseairships eve'y week. As soon as de war is over dey won't have no need for dem airships in de Europe war, an' dey will have about forty millions dat dey will want to sell cheap."

"Dat sounds good to me," Skeeter Butts said in pleased anticipation. "I always has wanted one of dem things."

"Well, you kin git you one," Red Cutt said. "A good hand-me-down airship—dis here gover'ment will be mighty nigh givin' 'em away, because dey won't have no whar to keep 'em atter de war is over."

"I'll shore git me one," Hitch Diamond said in a loud voice.

Red Cutt looked at him and nodded his head approvingly.

"I'll git me one," Vinegar Atts proclaimed.

"Put me down for one, de best one you got," Skeeter Butts announced.

"I ain't sellin' 'em, nigger," Red Cutt laughed. "I learns fellers how to fly in 'em. The gover'ment ain't gwine deliver 'em to you. Dey will all be landed at de same place on de Gulf of Mexico, an' eve'y nigger has got to go git his own an' pick out of the bunch de one dat he wants."

"You means dat we got to fly our own machine home?" Skeeter Butts inquired.

"Suttingly," Red Cutt answered.

"Gosh! I reckon we does need lessons in flyin'," Vinegar Atts proclaimed.

"One dollar, per lesson, each nigger," Red Cutt announced in a businesslike tone.

"How many niggers is allowed to learn at one time?" Skeeter inquired.

"One hundred niggers. We organizes de High Exalted Nigger Flyin' Club, and we all takes lessons at the same time."

"When is we gwine organize dis club?" Skeeter Butts inquired.

"It will suit me best if we organizes to-night," Red Cutt replied. "Because, you see, I ain't got so awful long to stay at any one place."

"I kin fix dat," Hitch Diamond growled. "De Nights of Darkness lodge meets to-night. We has got a little mo' dan one hundred members, but dar never wus a lodge full of niggers whar all of 'em had one dollar per each at one time. So I imagines dat when we sends out word dat eve'y nigger dat comes to de lodge to-night must have a dollar fer a special puppus dar won't be mo' dan one hunderd dat will see deir way clear to come."

"We might take our fust lesson at de lodge to-night, atter we completes de organization," Red Cutt suggested.

"Dat will suit me perzackly," Hitch rumbled.

"I's de presidunt of de Nights of Darkness lodge, and I'll give de word, an' whut I says goes."

Red Cutt reached to his hip-pocket and brought forth a red-covered book and laid it on the table before them. Vinegar Atts leaned over and gazed at the title of the book—"How to Fly." He opened to the title-page of the volume and beheld a picture of a man dressed in the aviator costume, with his goggles pushed back on his forehead, his mouth wide-spread in a happy grin.

"Somepin shore tickles dis flyin'-man," he chuckled. "I wonder is he so awful pleased wid himself because he is gwine up or because he has jes' come down?"

"As fer as I am concerned," Skeeter cackled, "I think I could pull a bigger grin atter I done come down dan I could ef I wus jes' gwine up."

"Atter you has studied dis book a while, an' tuck a few lessons in runnin' de machine, you will laugh de most at de chance of gwine up," Red told him.

He handed the book to Vinegar opened at the preface, and said:

"Read whut it says at the fust openin' of de book."

The colored clergyman leaned back and gazed at the page, reading aloud, giving to the words his peculiar African pronunciation.

"'Wid a desire to train an aviator into proper capability so dat he may, when embarkin' on his

career, have skillful an' complete knowledge of his perfession——'"

"Dat's de word!" Red proclaimed. "Skillful an' complete knowledge of his perfession!"

"'An' fly widout dose disasterous an' unnervin' consequences——'" Vinegar resumed but was instantly interrupted.

"Dat's de sentence whut suits me best," Skeeter announced. "I don't want no disasterous an' unnervin' consequences when I gits up in de air."

"Dis here am de very book dat shows you how not to have 'em," Red Cutt said. "'An' dis is de rule dat we go by."

He rapidly turned over the pages of the preface, indicating a place on the page, and allowed Vinegar to resume his reading.

"'Do not rush students through deir trainin'. Haste makes waste. Dis fack should be inscribed on de door of every hangar.'"

"Hanger!" Figger Bush exclaimed. "How come dat book speaks about hangin'? I thought we wus talkin' about flyin', an' now you done got off de subjeck."

The other three negroes looked at Red Cutt rebukingly, as if they also thought that he had brought into the matter of flying a theme which no negro in the South cares to discuss. He is willing to walk, to run, to swim or fly, but he has an insuperable aversion to hanging.

"Dat shows dat you niggers have got a heap to

learn," Red Cutt laughed. "A hangar is jes' like a stable. You keeps a buggy in de stable, an' a automobile in de garage, an' a airplane in a hangar."

"Mebbe so," Skeeter said in a dissatisfied tone. "But I don't like dat word, jes' de same."

"Dar ain't no noose to dis hangar I speaks of," Red Cutt assured him.

"No noose is good noose," Skeeter proclaimed. "But I don't like dat word."

"Don't let a word pester you," Red Cutt laughed as he rose to his feet and picked up his hat. "Meet me at de Nights of Darkness lodge to-night an' I'll tell you some things dat will git on your squeamishness heap wuss dan a word."

"We will all be dar!" the quartet chorused.

"All you got to do is to be dar wid yo' dollar," Red Cutt answered as he stepped through the green-baize door of the saloon.

V

A NEW THING

The ancient Greek of apostolic days was not alone in his eagerness "to see and to hear some new thing." When the word went abroad in the negro settlements of Tickfall that there was to be a new thing at the lodge that night, cost of admission being one dollar, three hundred and twenty-five negroes, by methods distinctly Ethiopian, secured

the necessary dollar, which for that night only was the password to the lodge.

When Red Cutt appeared upon the scene, he by himself was worth the price of admission. He had dressed himself in a faint imitation of the costume of an aviator. That costume was a mixture of all the varied uniforms that he had seen, and portions of which he could acquire.

Beginning at the feet, for some reason known only to himself, he wore a pair of spurs; around his legs were leather puttees—to that extent he resembled a cavalry officer. His pantaloons were hunting-breeches. His coat was a hunting-coat, somewhat appropriate because it was rain-proof, and might shed oil easily. His head-covering was a cap with a rubber visor, and his eyes were covered with enormous automobile goggles. He wore gauntlets on his hands, and somewhere he had acquired four brass buttons, from each of which was suspended a gaudy ribbon. He had evidently acquired these decorative ribbons at some association of drummers or the convention of some political party. One ribbon bore the words "Reception Committee." A second ribbon was inscribed "Delegate," and a third ribbon bore the magic word "Information."

He was escorted to a seat on the rostrum by the president of the lodge, and looking through his automobile goggles at the crowd of negroes assembled, he was surprised, and felt some uneasiness.

He had expected not more than one hundred negroes. That would have been a crowd that he could manage; but when he found exactly three times that number, the assemblage looked to him too much like a mob—or at least it looked like it might be easily converted into one.

Hitch Diamond rose to his feet.

"Brudders, dar is a cullud pusson here to-night who is come on a important job. He is de only nigger in dis country whut ever went up in a air-ship. He has had plenty expe'unce as a flyin' man, an' he has come to learn us all how to fly up!"

"Whar we gwine fly to?" a voice spoke up.

"Wherever you wants to go," Hitch Diamond answered.

At this point Pap Curtain rose to his feet. "Is dis here nigger a member of our lodge, Mr. Pres'dunt?" he snarled.

"Naw, suh."

"Is dis here some new degree we takes in dis lodge?" Pap persisted.

"Naw, suh."

"Well, whut is dis about?"

"Ef you'll set down, Pap," Hitch growled, "an' let our visitin' brudder tell his bizzness in his own way, mebbe you'll git some information."

"I's one of de bo'd of directors of dis here lodge," Pap snarled. "Ef dar is any bizzness dat I ain't seen about befo'hand, I'm ag'in' it."

The lodge members showed impatience at this

interruption. Pap had been a conscientious objector to nearly everything the lodge had ever undertaken. He was quick to notice their impatience, and sat down grumbling to himself.

Red Cutt arose and fingered the three badges on his breast. Touching one particular badge by the corner, and holding it out so that the lodge could see, he announced:

"Dis badge is marked 'Information,' an' means dat I'm de man who answers questions an' kin tell Pap Curtain whut he wants to know. Most of you knows my visit to dis town is to organize a school of flyin' niggers. Some of you knows how to run automobiles, an' so you kin ride over de country. I wants to learn you how to fly through de sky jes' as easy as you walk on de ground. Atter you have got de lesson in yo' mind, I will he'p you to buy a cheap airship from de gover'ment, an' den you will be fixed jes' like Gawd intended fer a nigger to be."

Pap Curtain sprang to his feet, waved his hat in the air, and exclaimed in a loud voice:

"I've heard tell of dese flyin' fellers, but I ain't never seen one fly. Ef dis visitin' brudder has come to give an exhibition I favors it!"

"Dat's whut he has come to do," Hitch assured him.

"Whar is yo' flyin'-machine at?" Pap howled.

"Out in de Little Moccasin prairie," Red told him.

"Less go out an' take a look at it!" Pap exclaimed.

"I favor it," three hundred negroes shouted in a chorus.

"I nominates myself to lead de peerade!" Vinegar Atts vociferated.

The movement was so unanimous that Red Cutt was frightened. He had no desire to go out to that airplane in the dark. He remembered a negro who had come to a little town where he had lived once and had pretended to be able to walk on the water. He posed as a divine healer, and a frequently made statement was: "I kin walk on de water, but I don't want to." Thereupon some skeptical negroes had carried him down to the banks of the Mississippi and tossed him headlong into the yellow stream, insisting that he give them a demonstration of his ability to do what he said he could do. They had fished this divine healer out of the river with a hook and rolled him on a barrel for an hour before he showed the least sign of returning consciousness. Red Cutt was appalled by the thought of what might happen to him if that mob of negroes insisted upon his giving a trial flight:

"Come on, niggers!" Vinegar Atts bellowed. "Less go out an' see de flyin'-machine!"

Three hundred negroes moved their feet as one man. Hitch Diamond laid his hand upon the arm of Red Cutt about as a policeman would put a man

under arrest. Vinegar stepped forward and got on the other side of the aviator, and they conducted him down the rickety stairs of the lodge room and led the procession that formed in a straggling line in the middle of the sandy street.

It was a night in which the moon shone in all its glory—such a moon as glows over the Louisiana swamps when the humidity of the atmosphere seems to focus the rays in startling brightness on every object. The negro is like a cat, sleepy and dull during the day; but he wakes up at night, and is a prowler in the streets and woods and fields. It was four miles to the Little Moccasin prairie, but that tramping crowd of men thought nothing of that, and as they marched they sang, keeping step to music that carried echoes of the African jungle, and those minor tones which are characteristic of all people who have been enslaved since the ancient days when subjugated Israel in the land of Egypt “hung their harps on the willows.”

“Look here, niggers,” Red said to Vinegar and Hitch. “Dis is not de proper night to take a ride in a airplane. De moon is shining too dang bright. Ef I git up fawty thousand foots in de air, an’ look down at the yearth in dis moonlight, eve’ything below me would look like a smooth sheet of white paper. I never would know whar I come from, an’ I wouldn’t know whar to land, an’ I might drif’ off, whar nobody never could find me, an’ whar I cain’t never git back here.”

"We don't want nothin' like dat," Hitch Diamond growled. "We cain't affode to lose you."

"Ef dese niggers insist on me takin' a ride, how is we gwine prevent it?" Red Cutt inquired.

"I'll tell you," Vinegar replied. "When we gits out whar de airship is at, I'll make 'em a speech."

In an hour they reached that point in the Little Moccasin prairie where the airplane rested on the smooth short grass. When they approached that wonder-mechanism of man's hand and brain, the negroes became reverently silent, and yet that silence was vocal with the weird, nerve-racking funereal sounds of the swamp. Great bullfrogs bellowed like multitudinous lost cattle; a wildcat screamed like the tones of a woman in great pain and fright; and the swamp wolves galloped to the edge of the clearing and barked at them with all the annoying impertinence of fice dogs.

Vinegar Atts did not like the looks of the airship. It was the first he had ever seen, and it bore too much resemblance to a wasp, and looked very much as if it might carry a dangerous stinger in its tail. With the true orator's instinct for dramatic effect, he looked around to find the most impressive place for him to stand. Not at the tail, because that might be dangerous; not at the sides, for wasp might flap its wings; so he moved up in front and stood looking with great interest at a wheel of paddles right in front of the machine.

That did not look good to him, either, so he backed off well out of range, and announced:

"Brudders of the Nights of Darkness lodge, as fer as I knows, dar ain't only two niggers in dis crowd dat ever seen one of dese things befo', but dis here chariot of fire ain't no new thing. De Prophet Elijah went up in one of 'em to heaven."

"Bless Gawd!" a negro's voice exclaimed reverently.

Then in his rich barytone voice, Vinegar Atts began to sing, and one by one the voices of the negroes joined in:

"I rode on de sky,
Went up mighty high,
Nor did envy Elijah his seat;
My soul mounted higher
In a chariot of fire,
And the moon, it wus under my feet."

In the melody of this song all the weird, jungle voices of the swamp were silenced. It seemed as if every bird and beast stood still to listen, and the Gulf breeze, playing over the fluted tree-tops, made a beautiful, Eolian accompaniment to the rich African voices.

Startled eyes glanced up at that moon which rode majestically through the still oceans of the sky, and the soul of every man was filled with awe at the thought of having that globe of glowing yellow under his brogan-shod feet. It was a thought to

stir the Ethiopian soul to its depths, laying hold upon the rich Oriental imagination, appealing to the jungle heritage of superstition, and causing them to thrill with mingled feelings of rapture and fear.

Vinegar Atts knew the value of the oratorical pause; he waited until the sighing of the trees and the radiance of the moonbeams had touched even the most stupid mind among them. And then in a deep, solemn voice he continued:

“Way back in de Ole Testarment day whar people lived forty thousan’ years ago, de Prophet Ezekiel tell us about dis here machine. I wus readin’ it to-night, and dis is whut de Good Book says:

“‘I looked an’ behold in de firmament dat wus above my head, dar wus de appearance of de likeness of a throne——’”

“My Gawd!” an awed voice exclaimed, as all the negroes turned and looked at the seat in the airplane. Vinegar Atts resumed:

“‘Dar appeared in de cherubim de form of a man’s hand under de wings, an’ when I looked, behold, four wheels as ef a wheel had been in de midst of a wheel. An’ when de cherubim went, de wheels went wid him——’”

“My—good—gosh!” Pap Curtain interrupted with his snarling voice, his tone surcharged with terror.

Vinegar Atts paid no heed to the interruption, but went on in a voice that was like a great bellow:

“De cherubim lifted up deir wings to mount from de yearth, an’ de same wheels turned not from beside dem; when dey stood, dese stood, an’ when dey wus lifted up, dese lifted up demselves also, fer de spirit of de livin’ creature wus in dem, an’ de cherubim lifted up deir wings an’ mounted from de yearth in my sight.’”

With the utterance of the last word, Vinegar waved his hand in a dramatic gesture toward the sky. There was one dark cloud in all the clearness of the atmosphere, a mass of fog and mist which had risen from the Gulf of Mexico and was scudding with amazing speed before the stiff, salty breeze from the south. The negroes glanced up at that cloud and watched it as it became smaller, sped to the edge of the horizon made by the forest, and disappeared from their sight. It seemed to them that some winged creature of the sky had sailed above them, and Vinegar, in his great superb barytone voice, began to sing:

“Let de chariot of fire roll by,
De sooner earth’s trials and sorrers shall cease,
De sooner us’ll enter de mansions of peace—
Let de chariot of fire roll by!”

The famous Tickfall quartet was there. Instantly Hitch Diamond, Skeeter Butts, and Figger Bush chimed in, and the song swept out across the silence of the swamp, echoing in that vast green-

house of vegetation which grew in such rank profusion. From the throats of three hundred negroes issued a low, moaning wail in perfect harmony with the music.

Vinegar Atts and Hitch Diamond turned and walked away. Skeeter Butts and Figger Bush followed, still singing, and the other negroes forgot the purpose for which they had walked four miles into the woods, and meekly, without protestation, trailed their leaders back to the town.

After all, they had seen enough to pay them for their trip. They had seen an airplane for the first time. They had something to think about; something to talk about, and, as for the flight of Red Cutt, they had something to anticipate.

One man alone was dissatisfied, but he was always dissatisfied. The sneer on Pap Curtain's lips was more pronounced, and the snarl in his voice was accentuated as he said to those who plodded along in the rear of the procession:

"Dat Red Cutt wus pretty sharp when he side-tracked his ride in dat airplane fer a speech by Elder Vinegar Atts. But dat nigger can't excape away, an' I'll make him fly yit or know the reason why."

The other negroes did not answer. They were too busy harmonizing with the Tickfall quartet:

"Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming to carry me home."

VI

A FEATHER IN HIS HAT

Early the next morning there were four men who paid a visit to all the negro settlements in Tickfall. They explained that they were a canvassing committee who were soliciting members for the High Exalted Negro Flying Club.

Red Cutt had told them that it was impossible to teach three hundred negroes at one time the art of aviation. The classes could not consist of more than one hundred, but he was willing to teach as many as wanted to learn. He said that he would have to divide them into three classes, and instruct just one class at a time.

It was the Tickfall Big Four who did the canvassing, and after a while there was a disagreement among them. The religious adherents of Vinegar's church fell out like the early disciples over the question of "Who should be greatest?"

They went back to Red Cutt and presented the matter to him.

"Who's gwine be president of dis here club?" Skeeter Butts demanded.

"I thinks you ought to be presidunt," Red told him, "because you done had some expe'unce as a flyin' man."

"Ain't dar no mo' jobs connected wid dis club?" Vinegar Atts inquired.

"Suttinly," Red told him. "I app'ints you observer right now."

"What do a observer do?" Vinegar Atts inquired.

"He sets up in de airplane an' looks at de scenery an' lets de worl' go by."

"Dat suits me," Vinegar bellowed. "Settin' down an' lookin' at things is a easy, high, hon'able job."

"I needs a job, too," Hitch Diamond grumbled.

"I app'ints you mechanic," Red Cutt announced promptly. "Git yo' tools an' all yo' wipin' rags an' git ready fer de job of keepin' dat machine in order."

"Whut do I git to do?" Figger Bush wanted to know.

"I nomernates you stabilizer."

"Does dat mean dat I keeps de stable whar de machine stays at?" Figger Bush inquired.

"Yep, you is de high boss keeper of the hangar, an' yo' job is to steady the machine when folks climbs in an' climbs out."

That each negro was satisfied with his job was apparent from the fact that he took out a cigarette and lighted it, and sat for a while in silent meditation. At last Vinegar spoke.

"We done collected up over a hundred dollars already."

The eyes of Red Cutt glowed like the little green eyes of a pig. He wet his lips with his tongue as

if he could already taste that money. His fingers twitched and he clasped them together covetously, saying, in a voice that was hungry with desire:

"Gimme dat money, quick, niggers. I always demands my pay in eggsvance."

The four negroes promptly emptied their pockets of the money they had collected, and Red Cutt drew a large buckskin bag from his coat-pocket and eagerly stuffed the soiled currency into its depths.

"I thinks eve'y nigger dat pays his dollar out ought to be allowed to wear some kind of badge what shows dat he belongs," Vinegar Atts remarked.

"I forgot to tell you about dat, nigger," Red Cutt replied promptly. "So I wants you to pass de word down de line to eve'y nigger dat paid his dollar dat he must get a chicken feather and wear it stuck up in his hat."

By two o'clock that afternoon, one hundred negroes in Tickfall suddenly sprouted feathers, and refused to tell in answer to any inquiry just what those feathers meant, for if a negro organizes a club or lodge, it is always a secret organization.

It was Sunday afternoon.

That morning, Vinegar, at the Shoofly church, made many eloquent references to the chariot of fire, to the men from the sky, to the machine that had a wheel in the midst of a wheel, and a form of a man's hand under the wings. It was just the sort of mysterious, high-sounding, and meaningless sermon that would catch the fancy of his emotional

and imaginative parishioners and the services at the Shoofly church on that particular morning were memorable.

At the most dramatic point of Vinegar's harangue, the colored clergyman took a letter out of his pocket and read it to his congregation with many theatrical flourishes.

There are big corporations in this country who do a large mail-order business. Of necessity, they must have a large mailing-list, and in order to acquire it they pay two cents for every name and address that is furnished them. Very much of that money is wasted in the South, and a great deal of their literature is squandered, for the reason that those who sell these addresses do not care whether it is the name of a man white or black.

Many negroes who cannot read get regular letters from great mail-order houses, and other large corporations who have something to sell will frequently address a letter to a colored man who cannot read it, and cannot understand it when it is read to him.

By this method Vinegar Atts had acquired the letter, which he was now parading before his congregation, and which he read in a loud, clear voice:

"REV. VINEGAR ATTS,

"Tickfall, Louisiana.

"DEAR SIR: Draw up your chair just a little closer; listen carefully and we will suggest to you how to make some money by investing a small amount.

"We are going to tell you about that opportunity you have been waiting for all your life. We are going to let you in on one of the best propositions offered since manufacturers tried to interest people financially in the automobile years ago.

"The war is over—peace is here—the airplane helped win that victory, and now the airplane will rapidly take the place of the automobile and the truck in commercial life.

"The man who makes money is the man who has the courage to back up his convictions. While money can be earned by labor, it can be multiplied only by investment. We offer you an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of this money-making proposition and reap the tremendous profits which we believe are bound to follow.

"Please read the enclosed folder carefully, and then if you decide you want to invest a modest sum and see it grow, let us hear from you at once."

Laying this letter aside, Vinegar spread open a folder to the gaze of his congregation. It contained impressive pictures of airplanes, and hydroplanes, of factories, and of work upon the big machines in their various stages of development.

"One dollar is a mighty modest sum, brudder," Vinegar bellowed. "Eve'y man whut is got a dollar ought to git in on de ground floor of dis money-makin' proposition an' reap de tremendous profits which is bound to follow behind. Dar is a flyin'-school teacher in dis town now, and I con-

siders it a religious thing to endorse his bizzness an' to git up a lot of learners in his flyin'-school."

It was whispered among the folks at the church that the first lesson in the art of flying would be given in the Little Moccasin prairie where the airplane was. So very early in the afternoon a long procession of negroes moved in that direction, and a very curious crowd had assembled about the machine. When the aviator, Red Cutt, made his appearance, he stood by the machine and delivered a harangue, explaining various parts of the machine, and calling them by certain names which would have been very interesting if heard in the aviation schools of this country.

Being familiar with the automobile, he could make a pretty shrewd guess at some things; but he also had that inestimable advantage which comes to the man who pretends to know when all others profess their ignorance.

A few minutes later, Hitch arrived. He carried an immense sack full of all sorts of tools. There was even an instrument for digging in the ground in that assortment, for Hitch was evidently ready, as the chief mechanic, to meet all emergencies. He carried also a large bag of cotton, with which he intended to wipe off the machinery and keep everything shining and bright just like new.

Skeeter arrived, looked at the machine, and listened to Red Cutt explaining its uses and manipulations to the crowd. He saw Hitch crawling

around underneath, wiping the wheels with cotton, and pretending to be very busy, while actually afraid to touch anything he saw under there.

Skeeter decided that his place on the program was to be seated in the machine. The negroes very eagerly lifted him up, and as he took his place on the seat, he felt that he had reached the highest point of prominence in his entire career.

Vinegar Atts, who had lingered too long at his Sunday dinner, was the last to arrive, and when he rode up in his little automobile and saw Skeeter Butts seated in the airplane like a king upon the throne, he was glad, indeed, that he had been elected to the high office of observer.

He pushed his way through the crowd and bawled at Skeeter:

"Hey, Skeeter! I wants to set up dar wid you."

"Dar ain't no room to set wid me," Skeeter announced. "Dar ain't but one seat, an' I am in it."

"But I got to set up dar! I'm de observer!" Vinegar howled.

Thereupon he clambered up into the machine, lifted Skeeter out of his place, sat down on the seat himself, and let Skeeter sit on his knee!

At this point Hitch Diamond climbed out from under the airplane, stuck a handful of dirty cotton waste into the bag that contained the rest of the cotton, and tossed the bag into the lap of Skeeter.

"You two niggers put dis sack of cotton in the tool-box under de seat!" Hitch Diamond bellowed.

"I cain't find de tool-box," Vinegar said.

"Well, put it under yo' foots den," Hitch told him. "Fer you got to take dat sack of wipin' cotton wharever you go."

VII

THE SIGN OF AVIATORS

As the negroes had gone out toward the Little Moccasin Swamp, all of them had passed a buggy that was moving at the slowest gait of the horse. The driving lines were wrapped around the whip, the horse moved sedately and slowly down the middle of the road. On the seat of the buggy was a young man who seemed to be able to see nothing but the girl who sat beside him; and if any other man had been blind to the presence of that girl, it could have been said of him that he had no appreciation of feminine beauty and loveliness. As the buggy passed the long, straggling procession of negroes, there was one fact so striking that the man asked:

"What are all these people wearing chicken feathers in their hats for?"

"I don't know," the girl answered. "Nobody can tell what a negro is going to do."

The negroes turned off into a little bridle path,

leaving the road free for the horse and buggy, and the young folks promptly forgot them. But when they drove at the same leisurely gait into Tickfall, they passed the Hen-Scratch saloon. There they beheld a diminutive darky, dressed in ragged clothes, seated in a disconsolate attitude on the curbstone in front of that popular barroom. His name was Little Bit, and both noticed that he wore a chicken feather in his hat.

For some reason the horse stopped in front of the barroom. Possibly the animal had been there before. The young man and woman did not object, for they had no destination in mind, and it really did not matter where they went or where they were.

"Look here, colored boy!" Jim spoke. "What are you and all the other negroes wearing that feather in your hat for?"

"Dat sign is fer aviators, boss," Little Bit answered.

Miss Juan Chieniere turned and shot a significant glance at the young man sitting beside her.

That young man's face turned as white as milk. The lines of gentleness and good nature around his mouth changed until the whole face was drawn in lineaments of desperate recklessness. The one thought in his mind, of course, was that a scouting party had been sent out to look for the lost airplane, and the aviators had come to Tickfall. He had no idea what punishment would await him at

the aviation camp if he was captured in Tickfall and taken back.

Something of his great danger was conceived by the girl, and she asked in a nervous voice:

"What aviators, Little Bit?"

"I dunno, Miss Jew-ann," Little Bit answered. "But all de niggers has gone out to the Little Moccasin prairie to see the airships. Dey wouldn't let me go. Dey made me stay at home and take keer of de saloon."

This remark confirmed Jim Gannaway's fears that the scouting party had really arrived in Tickfall. He had scanned the horizon many times since his arrival in that neighborhood on the evening before, and he wondered how that scouting party had arrived without his seeing them. His soul was tormented with anxiety, and he turned and looked at the girl as if he was seeing her for the last time. Dismounting from the buggy, he stood close beside her and said:

"Juan, I took a desperate risk in coming from the aviation camp to see you. I could not borrow a machine for the purpose, and could not have got leave of absence, so I had to swipe a machine. I told you I had come to get your promise to marry me, but I cannot ask you now because I have no idea what they will do to me when they take me back to camp."

"What about that beautiful lie, Jim?" she asked with trembling lips.

"It would have been all right if I had made my way back to the camp without being caught; but now they have come after me, and there is nothing for me to tell but the beautiful truth."

"What is the beautiful truth, Jim?" she asked.

"It is that I loved you so much that I was willing to take the most desperate chances to see you. Whatever may happen to me for what I have done will be but a small payment exacted from me in return for the pleasure I have had."

With the adorable impudence of the Frenchwoman, Miss Juan straightened back in the buggy and looked at him with eyes that sparkled.

"I have a beautiful truth to say, also," she asserted. "It is, that I love you, and if you ever get out of your troubles alive I will marry you; and if you get killed for what you have done, I will mourn for you forever and forever."

She reached out and drew his head to her and kissed him.

"Go!" she said, as she pointed toward the Little Moccasin Swamp, "and remember that my love goes with you."

He did not hesitate a moment, but turned and left her, pausing only to wave back at her as he passed out of sight around the nearest corner. The girl turned her buggy and started slowly back toward her home, her heart heavy and her lovely face picturing her wretchedness.

To all of this, Little Bit had been an interested

witness. It was a free show, no charge for admission; the first time in his life he had seen a love scene between two white folks.

It was evidently funny to him, for he sat there laughing aloud, and his laugh bore a strong resemblance to the cackling of a hen.

VIII

GOING UP!

On the Little Moccasin prairie the excitement and enjoyment of the negroes were at their greatest height.

The feeling of awe toward the airplane had passed away. One by one they had climbed up into the seat. After a while they seated Skeeter Butts and Vinegar Atts in the machine, and every man that had paid his dollar and wore his feather in his cap took his turn at helping to push the airplane over the ground. It was followed by all the other negroes who shouted and whooped as it bumped along over the prairie like some awkward, stiff-legged, ridiculous bird which spurned the earth and felt like it was a disgrace to be upon the ground.

In the midst of this excitement, with its noise of laughter and the shouting, James Gannaway appeared at the edge of the swamp and looked out over the field with a real fear that he had never

felt, even in the most dangerous situations in the air.

What he saw filled his heart with joy. No more fear that scouting planes had found the lost machine. All that the feathers in the hats of the negroes meant was that the blacks of Tickfall had found the hidden airplane. He waited until they had pushed the machine near to where he stood concealed in the dense foliage of the swamp. At that moment Vinegar Atts and Skeeter stood up from their seats in the machine and began to sing. It was one of the best-loved songs among the negroes, and that great crowd sent it echoing through the majestic forest with their mighty organ tones until James Gannaway wondered that the human voice could express such music.

“O come, angel band!

Come, an' aroun' me stand!

O bear me away on yo' snowy wings

To my immortal home;

O bear me away on yo' snowy wings

To my immortal home.”

At the conclusion of the song, for some reason, both Vinegar and Skeeter climbed out of the machine. Then Gannaway stepped forth, waved a dispersing hand, and exclaimed:

“You niggers, get to hell away from here!”

Nothing could have surprised the negroes more than the appearance of this white man. Up to

that very moment they had never questioned that the machine belonged to the negro, Red Cutt. When they heard that voice of command and turned their startled eyes to Gannaway, they pushed backward in their fright and scattered across the prairie like so many chickens.

Gannaway sprang lightly into the machine and started the engine. Three times in rapid succession the engine back-fired, and the sound was so similar to the explosion of a big army pistol that the negroes believed the white man was shooting at them. Then came the steady exhaust of the engine, cracking like a rapid-fire machine-gun, and every negro fell flat on his face to dodge the bullets he thought were flying all around him.

The machine went hopping awkwardly across the long level stretch of ground, and the negroes raised their heads like so many black lizards, watching to see if the white man was shooting toward them.

A moment later five hundred negroes gave utterance to an astounded "Ah!"

Of that great crowd, Vinegar Atts and Red Cutt had seen the airplane land; if Skeeter Butts was not lying, he was the third of the crowd who had seen an airplane in the air. Not one of the others had ever witnessed such a flight, and this universal exclamation emerged from their throats when they saw the machine rise from the ground like a wild goose and go sailing over the tops of the trees.

Five hundred negroes lying flat upon the ground, with their noses almost touching the dirt, put their hands on the feathers in their hats, to be sure that their insignia of office had not departed with the machine, and repeated their exclamation: "Ah!"

Suddenly the entire forest seemed to become vocal and scream in fright. Thousands of birds rose from the trees and circled round and round in the air as if they were intoxicated. The smaller birds flew from tree to tree, moving in a straight line, all going in the same direction, as they do when fleeing before a cyclone. The pigeons and hawks shot straight up in the air and then tumbled over and over as they came down, as if both wings were broken. The great eagles rose like the fighting creatures they are and threshed madly about high up in the heavens, sending their ugly snarl-like cries down to the earth, while from countless pools in the swamp every sort of water fowl rose with hoarse croaking voices and added to the aerial tumult.

To the negroes it seemed that the very skies were dropping down upon them every feathered creature God had ever made. They saw fowls of the air that they did not know existed under the heavens, and they heard bird-voices expressing fright which possibly had never been heard by human beings before.

Somewhere outside of their range of vision the

airplane was still moving, for they could hear the exhaust like a steady purr in the distance. Everywhere that the machine went it caused the same excitement among the birds, so that a great multitude of these winged creatures were in terrified flight.

The terror laid hold upon the animals in the swamp, for there suddenly rose in a mighty chorus the scream of the panther and the wailing bark of the wolf and the angry, frightened roar of the bear. All the animals in the vicinity of the Little Moccasin prairie very naturally ran toward that open space; if rapid flight was necessary, any land animal could travel faster where there were no vines or stumps or trees or marshy places to hinder flight.

A drove of wild hogs, numbering several hundred, traveling with the speed and noise of an express train, and, like the exhaust of an automobile, uttering at every jump their frightened exclamation: "Whoof, whoof, whoof!" swept across that prairie, and every negro flattened himself upon the ground where he was lying and bawled aloud his supplication to the Almighty: "Dat He wouldn't let no wild hawg step on him!" The drove of hogs passed without damage.

Then three young deer came galloping across the field, leaping over those prostrated bodies and dancing among the men, women, and children like so many pet rabbits. Behind them two

panthers slung across the open space, spitting venomously at something they thought they had left in the woods.

After that something arrived upon the scene which brought every negro to his feet. Four black bears came out of the woods and lumbered over and joined the terrified negroes. The black bear of Louisiana is small and harmless. But to a negro he always looks extremely large and very ferocious. The other wild animals that had crossed the prairie seemed to have a destination, and they went on across.

When the black bears came they seemed to have arrived at the place they were going and appeared to be delighted at finding five or six hundred black folks at the same place to receive them and protect them. But the negroes sprang upon their feet with five or six hundred assorted yells of terror, and were getting ready to scatter out into the woods when a sound above their heads caused them to look up, and lo! the airplane had returned and was now three thousand feet above them.

It was the gloriously beautiful hour of sunset. The sky was clear and the air was still. In a little while the moon, which was even then visible in the sky, would shine in full effulgence, and would make an ideal night for the return of the airplane to the aviation field.

James Gannaway was feeling fine, and he showed it by giving the negroes an exhibition of

stunt-flying. If he had known that the negroes did not appreciate this exhibition for what it was worth, he doubtless would have done the kindly thing and gone on his way. But when the negroes looked up in the air and saw the machine not much larger in their sight than a toy, they forgot all about the frolicking bears and were petrified by terror at the vision above them.

The machine turned upside down, then righted itself, then began to ascend in long, spiral glides; then turned upside down, and the aviator flew in that position for some moments. Again the machine righted itself and began to mount upward until it was hardly more than a tiny speck in the sky. Hovering directly above them it dived and seemed to drop with the rapidity of a falling star.

Every negro nerved himself to see the machine crash down upon the ground, when suddenly it turned and once more began its beautiful flight, up above the birds that screamed and circled and tumbled in the air like circus performers.

Vinegar Atts dropped upon his knees and lifted up two black hands in the direction of the ascending machine which now looked not much larger than a wasp and bawled aloud:

"O Lawd, ef you got any pity on dis pore nigger, jes' keep dat machine a gwine up!"

"Keep her gwine up, Lawd!" five hundred voices wailed in a mighty chorus of endorsement.

"O Lawd, Thou hast told us dat de early bird ketches de worm. Us is pore worms of de dust! Perteck us from dat cherubim of de sky wid de hands of a man under its wings!" Vinegar whooped.

"Perteck us, Lawd; hab mussy on us wormes!" answered the frightened negroes in a mighty chorus.

"Keep dese here ole hawgs an' bears an' deerses offen us, too, good Lawd!" Vinegar wailed. "We don't want ax too much of you-alls, but dese here is perilous times fer pore he'pless niggers!"

"Us pore niggers!" the chorus howled. "O Gawd, de birds of de air an' de beasts of de field is sot ag'in' us, an' ef you don't he'p us, we is blowed up blacks!"

"Dar won't be nothin' left of us but remainders!" Vinegar amended. "Some of us ain't never axed you fer nothin' befo', an' we ain't never aimin' to pester you agin. But we needs you now, Lawd—dis here is a groun'-hawg case!"

"A groun'-hawg—case!" the negroes wailed.

"O Lawd, she's a gittin' littler an' littler!" Vinegar whooped. "She's gwine up—gwine up—gwine up! Don't go back on us now an' let her drap down no more! Keep her gwine up!"

"Keep her gwine up!" the mob pleaded.

The animal noises in the swamp had ceased. The wild flight of the birds had taken them somewhere else. The airplane was a tiny speck in the

sunset sky. But the mighty emotional crisis through which the negroes had passed left them raving in a delirium and acting like maniacs.

Vinegar Atts was temporarily insane. The other negroes were as crazy as bats. So, as they knelt upon the grass of the prairie, they began a mighty antiphony of Biblical quotations, Vinegar leading the vociferation with a voice which shall never be excelled in volume until the angel of time shall stand with one foot on the land and the other on the sea and swear that time shall be no longer.

"I seed a mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed wid a cloud, an' a rainbow wus upon his head—" Vinegar roared.

"An his face wus as de sun an' his foots wus pillars of fire!" the crowd answered.

"An' he helt in his hand a little book—" Vinegar screamed.

"An he sot his right foot in de sea an' his left foot on de yearth!" the mob responded.

"An' cried wid a loud voice as when a lion roars!" Vinegar vociferated.

"An' when he had cried seben thunders uttered deir voices!" the people whooped.

They seemed to think that all of this was efficacious in expediting the ascent of the airplane, for as long as they kept it up the machine kept climbing.

In a moment it disappeared from their sight.

"She's gone!" they howled in a mighty chorus of relief. "Bless Gawd, she's done went up outen our sight ferever!"

IX

A BAG OF COTTON

The negroes drew the first easy breath they had taken for several minutes.

"Praise de Lawd!" Vinegar laughed. "I's glad I kept my good senses and didn't git skeart!"

"Skeart!" Hitch Diamond mocked derisively. "You wus so skeart you wus squealin' like a burnt pig!"

"I warn't really a coward," Vinegar said defensively. "But I wus sort of discreet. An' I wusn't by myself in dat—dis whole mob of niggers wus movin' from side to side in dis here prairie like butter-beans b'ilin' in a kittle."

"Shore dey wus," Hitch Diamond answered. "Dey wus skeart an' I wus skeart an' eve'ybody wus skeart—escusin' you."

"Dat ole airship is jes' like a ole dog widout no teeth—it makes a lot of noise, but 'tain't no harm," Vinegar said complacently.

Suddenly, from the direction of the setting sun, a long, slanting shadow crossed the prairie like a black knife cutting through their composure and leaving them wide open to the terror which approached.

The airplane was advancing upon them, apparently just skirting the tops of the trees, and the noise of the exhaust of the engine was deafening, terrifying, nerve-racking, a sound which reminded these country negroes of nothing so much as a great forest fire in a cane-brake where the popping of the cane is like the musketry of battle. They did not know whether to run or lie down or stand still, but finally their action was universal and automatic—they tumbled over on the ground like a lot of dead geraniums in a broken pot. All of this was an experience so entirely new to them that there was no precedent; they had never been along that path before. That great motor sounded to them like disease and death, and it made enough noise to make a snail jump through a barrel-hoop.

But there is one thing every negro can do. His fright is like kerosene poured on hot coals: it goes up in vapor and goes off with a bang. When those explosive sounds began to prod the negroes like hat-pins running into their ears, they began to howl and pray, and from five or six hundred throats there arose an assorted series of yells—they sang a long scale of variegated vociferations of fright—and they uttered implorations and prayers, and made promises to the God of heaven in return for his protection, promises which they could not have remembered in sober moments, much less performed.

As the machine came nearer to them and looked

like it was coming down to the ground to mow them down with its wide-spreading wings, five hundred men, women, and children flattened themselves upon the ground, uttered a farewell gasp like a fish dying in the bottom of a boat and prayed that God would remove all rotundity and make them as flat as a withered leaf to meet this emergency that was upon them.

When about one hundred feet above the ground the aviator tossed out of the machine Hitch Diamond's bag of cotton waste. Had he known the contents of that bag he would have tossed it out a long time before. During all his stunts in the air he had held this sack of worthless cotton waste, and out of the kindness of a heart that was full of love for a woman he had returned it to the rightful owners.

The bag landed on the shoulders of Vinegar Atts. Vinegar merely spread out like a busted bag of oats and sang an up-and-down tune of assorted prayers like the howling of a hound dog. After a long time, when the exhaust of the engine sounded far away, he slowly rose up like a mouse in a trap, scared and begging on its hind legs.

"My Gawd!" he whooped. "I had a powerful good chance fer heaven dat time. I'm got more lives dan a litter of kittens!"

Then, seeing the bag of cotton waste on the ground, for some reason he got the notion that Hitch Diamond had hit him on the back with that

bag. He picked it up and struck Hitch over the head with it.

Hitch cautiously raised his head and elevated his face toward the sky, his nose wrinkled up like the front of a washboard. The airplane was far away. He slowly turned his head and saw Vinegar standing beside him with a bag of cotton waste in his hand. His eyes stuck out like the buttons on an overcoat, and he rose from the ground and started for Vinegar with a bellow of rage which had made him famous in the pugilistic ring in the South.

As if in answer to a signal every negro rose from the ground and started a free-for-all fight, a rough-and-tumble affair which is the delight of the darky and generally does no great harm. Men and women pushed and pounded at each other, and grunted, and slapped faces, and wrestled, bouncing chunks of wood off of each other's heads and going after each other's skin like they were working by the job and wanted to get it all off right away.

Then a few not participating in the scrap glanced up and pointed, exclaiming: "Look! Look dar!"

Far up in the sunset sky, getting smaller and smaller as it climbed, the beautiful airplane passed into the purple and gold shadows of the closing day and disappeared from their sight.

There was an awed silence which was broken after a moment by the snarling voice of Pap: "Whar is dat Red Cutt gone at?"

"He's done gone!" dozens of voices answered.

"Did he hab our money on him?"

"Yep, he tuck it all!" Vinegar howled.

"I said I'd make dat nigger fly!" Pap exclaimed.

"An' now he has done flew!"

"De way he flew is de only way he could fly," Skeeter Butts laughed. "I'm satisfied in my mind dat nigger didn't know any more about a airship dan a dog knows about a white shirt. And now he's done run off wid my dollar."

"I don't keer," Vinegar said. "I done got my dollar's wuth of fun outen dat machine, an' I expeck I'd better be gittin' back to town. I'm got to preach at de Shoofly church to-night."

In the fight which had occurred the bag of cotton which the aviator had dropped from his machine had been torn to pieces and the cotton scattered all over the prairie. A number of negro boys amused themselves by throwing the wads of cotton at each other and at their elders. One negro boy picked up a wad and hurled it at the fat stomach of the Rev. Vinegar Atts.

Vinegar doubled up with a yell of pain, and then stooped and picked up something.

It was a buckskin bag, which Vinegar had last seen in the possession of Red Cutt.

"My Gawd!" Hitch Diamond bellowed. "Ain't dat our bag of money?"

With trembling fingers Vinegar untied the buckskin bag and drew out a large number of soiled

bills. There was a shout of delight which James Gannaway could have heard fifteen thousand feet in the air.

“When dat nigger, Red Cutt, climbed up into dat machine, he hid dat money in my sack of cotton,” Hitch howled, “an’ now we done get it all back. Bless Gawd!”

So it was a happy band which moved slowly back to Tickfall. Vinegar Atts forgetting all about his automobile walked back to town with the others. He improvised a song on the way which he taught his fellow pilgrims. The chorus, repeated many times, was this:

“De airships fly up to de sky
An’ circle all de stars around.
While yuthers try to fly on high—
Lawd, keep my foots on solid ground.”

When they had sung the chorus for about the first time there was great excitement in Tickfall, four miles away.

The first army airplane ever seen in that neighborhood flew over the town, and every man, woman, and child was looking at it. The aviator gave an exhibition of stunt flying. First, a series of loops, then tail slides, then what he would have called a “stall,” a maneuver in which the machine was brought to a dead stop after reaching the apex of an upward curve. Then he did side slides and

nose dives. It was wonderful to the people of Tickfall to see the number of evolutions that pilot put his machine through.

There were all kinds of funny stunts, and that machine cut all sorts of queer figures like a playful kitten of the clouds.

The people of Tickfall thought that he was doing all of that for them—but they were greatly mistaken.

Everything James Gannaway did was a message telling a certain girl that all was well with him, that he would return to the aviation camp with his own beautiful lie and her beautiful truth, and that he anticipated no trouble before him. Most of all, it was a message of passionate love to that same girl, who now sat alone in her buggy on a sandy road and looked up at the airplane with eyes that filled with tears and glowed with love like stars.



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